Introduction: The fragmented state of opinion research

This book is an extended argument about how people form political preferences. It seeks to show how news and political arguments diffuse through large populations, how individuals evaluate this information in light of their political values and other predispositions, and how they convert their reactions into attitude reports on mass surveys and vote decisions in elections.

The argument of the book applies to a very wide range of problems in mass political behavior—among them, racial and political tolerance, support for American involvement in overseas wars, voting in presidential and congressional elections and in presidential primaries, presidential popularity, trust in government, and judgments about the economy.

The dynamic element in the argument—the moving part, so to speak—is coverage of public affairs information in the mass media. This coverage may consist of ostensibly objective news reports, partisan argumentation, televised news conferences, or even paid advertisements, as in election campaigns. What matters for the formation of mass opinion is the relative balance and overall amount of media attention to contending political positions.

Although the book deals with the formation of political preferences in numerous cases, it maintains a high level of generality. The aim is to integrate as much as possible of the dynamics of public opinion within a cohesive theoretical system.

The ideas necessary to accomplish this integration are few and surprisingly simple. The first is that citizens vary in their habitual attention to politics and hence in their exposure to political information and argumentation in the media.

The second is that people are able to react critically to the arguments they encounter only to the extent that they are knowledgeable about political affairs. The third is that citizens do not typically carry around in their heads fixed attitudes on every issue on which a pollster may happen to inquire; rather, they construct “opinion statements” on the fly as they confront each new issue. The fourth is that, in constructing their opinion statements, people make greatest use of ideas that are, for one reason or another, most immediately salient to them—at the “top of the head,” to use the phrase of Taylor and Fiske (1978).

Once these basic notions have been appropriately organized and to a limited extent formalized, the need for numerous domain-specific theories and conventional distinctions in the political behavior field disappears, even distinctions...
between vote choices and choices between opposing response options on questionnaires. Each "domain" can be treated as simply another context in which citizens formulate responses on the basis of the ideas that have reached them and been found acceptable. Several major methodological issues, as well as discussions concerning the nature of mass belief systems, can also be fruitfully accommodated within the model.

Efforts at integration of research findings are uncommon in the public opinion field. With only a handful of exceptions, the trend is in the other direction toward the multiplication of domain-specific concepts and distinctions. Thus, analysts largely explain voting in presidential elections separately from voting in congressional elections, racial tolerance separately from political tolerance, foreign policy attitudes separately from all other attitudes, and so on. Certain general topics, such as political attitude change, are typically addressed only in the context of particular substantive topics, such as "agenda setting" or presidential popularity, so that there is presently little general literature on attitude change within the public opinion field. But other general topics, such as the nature of political attitudes, are typically addressed only in specialized literatures.

The result of all this specialization is that the public opinion field has devolved into a collection of insular subliteratures that rarely communicate with one another. Hence, we know much more about the details of particular dependent variables than we do about theoretical mechanisms that span multiple research domains.

Despite this, the potential for theoretical integration is great. Two types of individual-level variables, political awareness and political values, are important across a wide range of situations and, as I seek to show in this book, have essentially the same effects across domains. Mass opinion change, as will become apparent, seems to conform to the same principles in whatever context it occurs. The sketchy evidence that exists suggests that elite discourse has much the same effects on public opinion across a broad range of topics. And finally, the process by which people choose between opposing policy prescriptions appears quite similar to how they choose between candidates. There seems, thus, to be no strong justification for the current practice of organizing nearly all public opinion research around particular dependent variables, and this book is a deliberate attempt to break with this practice.

All scientific theories, as William James observed, tend to leak about the joints. Mine will be no exception. In particular, the breadth and generality for which I aim in this book have been achieved at the expense of strong assumptions and some important simplifications. There has been little choice about this. Any study of public opinion, or any other large-scale social phenomenon, that took seriously every plausible avenue of influence and every proposed conceptual distinction would be able to provide little more than descriptive accounts of the phenomena of interest. Broad social theory and strong results require strong assumptions and significant simplifications, and it is foolish to pretend otherwise.

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This methodological posture will suit the tastes of some readers, but it will make others uneasy. To those who find my approach dubious, I can say two things: First, that the public opinion field is long overdue for an attempt to sketch a unified theory of its major empirical regularities, and without some license to make assumptions and simplifications, no such theory is possible. And second, that I will not disguise my simplifications but will, on the contrary, both highlight them by bald statement and make clear why they may be questioned. To avoid confusion and the appearance of constant waffling, I will not always criticize my argument in the same paragraphs in which I make it, but will instead save most of my self-criticism for a later chapter. But the self-criticism will be there. The skeptical reader, having weighed it, can then decide whether my results have been worth their price.

In attempting to state my arguments as clearly and generally as possible, I make limited use of formal and statistical modeling. Despite this, the book is no more technical than many studies of public opinion and much less technical than some. The taste and limited technical abilities of the author are the main reason for this. In only one chapter (Chapter 9) is it important for the reader to follow extensive mathematical arguments, and even there it is possible to skip the math without missing the central points of the chapter.

A preliminary word on the disciplinary orientation of the book will perhaps also be useful to readers. The book, as indicated, is primarily concerned with how individuals convert political information and argumentation into political opinions. As such, it is essentially a study in political psychology. As will become apparent, the book also draws heavily on ideas and evidence that have been developed by psychologists. Nevertheless, the book is closer to the discipline of political science than to psychology. A superficial indication of this is that the book avoids technical psychological terms and tends instead to favor terms from the language of everyday politics. Thus the primitive term in my model of how citizens organize political information in their minds will not be "schema" but "consideration." A more important indication of disciplinary orientation is that, in contrast to some psychological studies of politics, this book pays vastly more attention to the social sources of mass attitudes—in particular, the availability of information in elite discourse—than to the largely autonomous operation of people’s minds and psyches on the world as they perceive it. Finally, and most importantly, the book limits itself to ideas that can be readily tested in typical public opinion surveys. I leave those phenomena that can be effectively demonstrated only in psychological laboratories—even those phenomena that undeniably exist and have consequences outside the laboratory—to researchers in other disciplines. Thus, experimental psychologists, in particular, should be warned that my arguments may be simpler, even

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1 This orientation does not rule out the conduct of experiments, provided they can be conducted in a typical survey setting. Nor does it rule out ideas that originate in psychological laboratories and do have testable implications for mass surveys, such as McGuire’s (1966) theory of attitude change.
radically simpler, than they may feel is warranted by the type of data available to them.

To put the matter somewhat differently, I, as an analyst of public opinion, am not concerned with developing models that approximate as closely as possible the intricacies of human information processing. Rather, I am concerned with capturing, with as little extraneous theoretical apparatus as possible, those aspects of information processing that have demonstrable relevance for understanding the dynamics of public opinion on major issues, as public opinion on major issues is typically measured.

Inasmuch as the book is centrally concerned with how citizens use information from the mass media to form political preferences, it also substantially overlaps core concerns of the field of mass communication. If mass communications is broadly defined, as it often is, to include concern with the nature of public opinion, the overlap is even greater. I am not, however, aware of any important difference between my general approach to these concerns and the approaches taken in the communication field.

One consequence of the stress on generality in this book is that its organization is somewhat unusual. Rather than having a chapter on each of several substantive domains—foreign policy attitudes, domestic policy attitudes, presidential elections, congressional elections, and so forth—the book is organized around more general theoretical matters: how people answer survey questions, how attitude change occurs, the effects of opposing mass communications of unequal intensities, and so forth.

This mode of organization turns out to have an enormous practical advantage. Quite different kinds of data have been collected in different substantive domains, some of which provide leverage on questions that are unanswerable from data that are, or are likely to be, available from other domains. Data from the 1978 congressional election are particularly valuable to this book because they contain identical and highly detailed measures of attitudes that have been formed across several dozen separate political campaigns. Once it has become clear how choosing between candidates on a ballot is like choosing between response options on a typical attitude survey, these congressional data become extremely useful for illustrating the dynamics of preference formation in general.

The argument of the book develops as follows: Chapters 2 and 3 introduce the principal theoretical concepts of the book and a simple model based on them. The remainder of the book is then concerned with drawing out the deductive implications of this model and testing them against the available data.

Chapters 4 and 5 deal with the nature of political attitudes—or more precisely, how individuals convert the ideas in their heads to answers to closed-ended survey questions. Chapter 6 turns to the substantive content of people’s attitudes, showing how elite opinion leadership, individuals’ level of attentiveness to elite cues, and differences in individual political values interact to affect opinion statements. Chapter 6, however, deals only with static distributions of opinion, such as can be observed in typical, one-shot opinion surveys. Chapters
Information, predispositions, and opinion

Every opinion is a marriage of information and predisposition: information to form a mental picture of the given issue, and predisposition to motivate some conclusion about it. The central aim of this book is to show how, across a very wide range of issues, variations in the information carried in elite discourse, individual differences in attention to this information, and individual differences in political values and other predispositions jointly determine the contours of public opinion. The book, thus, is most crucially about the relationship among information, predispositions, and opinion.

The present chapter introduces and defines these key terms, examines some critical problems associated with their study, and shows in a preliminary way how they relate to one another. In so doing, it develops the intuitions behind the more technical core of the book, which begins in Chapter 3.

INFORMATION AND ELITE DISCOURSE

To an extent that few like but none can avoid, citizens in large societies are dependent on unseen and usually unknown others for most of their information about the larger world in which they live. As Walter Lippmann wrote in his classic treatise, Public Opinion (1922/1946),

Each of us lives and works on a small part of the earth's surface, moves in a small circle, and of these acquaintances knows only a few intimately. Of any public event that has wide effects we see at best only a phase and an aspect. . . . Inevitably our opinions cover a bigger space, a longer reach of time, a greater number of things, than we can directly observe. They have, therefore, to be pieced together out of what others have reported and what we can imagine. (p. 59)

The "others" on whom we depend, directly or indirectly, for information about the world are, for the most part, persons who devote themselves full time to some aspect of politics or public affairs—which is to say, political elites. These elites include politicians, higher-level government officials, journalists, some activists, and many kinds of experts and policy specialists. Even when we learn from friends or family members about some aspect of public affairs, often we may still be secondhand consumers of ideas that originated more distantly among some type of elite.

The information that reaches the public is never a full record of important events and developments in the world. It is, rather, a highly selective and stereotyped view of what has taken place. It could hardly be otherwise. But even if it could, the public would have little desire to be kept closely informed about the vast world beyond its personal experience. It requires news presentations that are short, simple, and highly thematic—in a word, stereotyped. Thus, Doris Graber (1984), in a close study of how a sample of citizens monitored the news, found that her subjects “grumbled frequently about the oversimplified treatment of [television] news . . . .” Yet when special news programs and newspaper features presented a small opportunity for more extensive exposure to issues, they were unwilling to seize it. For the most part, citizens would not read and study carefully the more extensive versions of election and other news in newspapers and news magazines. Masses of specific facts and statistics were uniformly characterized as dull, confusing, and unduly detailed. . . . (p. 105)

Lippmann, who remains perhaps the most insightful analyst of the process by which the public comes to form an understanding of complex and distant events, devoted a large section of Public Opinion to news stereotypes, or what today are more often called frames of reference. In one lucid passage, he described World War I as it would probably have been perceived by a character in Sinclair Lewis's Main Street:

Miss Sherwin of Gopher Prairie is aware that a war is raging in France and tries to conceive it. She has never been to France, and certainly she has never been along what is now the battlefield. Pictures of France and German soldiers she has seen, but it is impossible for her to imagine three million men. No one, in fact, can imagine them, and professionals do not try. They think of them as, say, two hundred divisions. But Miss Sherwin has no access to the order of battle maps, and if she is to think about the war, she fastens upon Joffre and the Kaiser as if they were engaged in a personal duel. Perhaps if you could see what she sees with her mind's eye, the image in its composition might be not unlike an Eighteenth Century engraving of a great soldier. He stands there boldly unflinced and more than life size, with a shadowy army of tiny little figures winding off into the landscape behind. (p. 8)

As suggested by Miss Sherwin's reliance on an eighteenth-century engraving, Lippmann doubted that individuals can personally create the stereotypes and other symbolic representations—"the pictures in our heads"—by which remote and even proximate events are understood. Rather, in the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture. (p. 61)

Many of the stereotypes to which Lippmann refers are permanent features of the culture—the corrupt politician, the labor strike, the election contest, the yeoman farmer. But because society is always churning up new issues and problems, many stereotypes are recent creations. For example, research has shown how, in the debate over the Equal Rights Amendment, stereotypes of unisex toilets and women combat troops came into being as a reflection of the
organizational and ideological needs of the contending activists (Mansbridge, 1986). Luker has done similar research on the origins of the Pro-Choice and Pro-Life labels in the contrasting world views of abortion activists (Luker, 1984). A powerful stereotype that has emerged in recent years is that of "the homeless." Stereotypes and frames like these are important to the process by which the public keeps informed because they determine what the public thinks it is becoming informed about, which in turn often determines how people take sides on political issues (Edelman, 1964; Bennett, 1980; Gamson and Modigliani, 1987; Kinder and Sanders, 1990).

Although culturally given and elite-supplied stereotypes may be most powerful in shaping public understanding of events that are "out of reach, out of sight, out of mind" (Lippmann, 1922/1946, p. 21), they can be important even for matters within people's powers of direct observation. For example, Iyengar (1991) has used experimental evidence to argue that whether television news focuses on "episodic" cases of individual poverty, or the societwide conditions that cause poverty, affects the public's attribution of blame for poverty and thereby its willingness to support programs aimed at alleviating it.

Perhaps the most fundamental question about news stereotypes, or frames of reference, is whether the public is given any choice about them - whether, that is, it is permitted to choose between alternative visions of what the issue is. For in the absence of such choice, the public can do little more than follow the elite consensus on what should be done. For example, in the early phase of American involvement in the Vietnam War, the public was offered only one way to think about the war, namely as a struggle to preserve freedom by "containing Communism." Even news stories that criticized government policy did so within a framework that assumed the paramount importance of winning the war and defeating communism (Halberstam, 1979; Hallin, 1986). During this period, public support for American involvement in the war was very strong, and those members of the public most heavily exposed to the mass media supported the "official line" most strongly.

In the later phase of the war, however, journalists began to present information in ways suggesting that it was essentially a civil war among contending Vietnamese factions and hence both inessential to U.S. security interests and also perhaps unwinnable. Coverage implicitly supportive of the war continued, but it no longer had near-monopoly status. Owing, as I show in Chapter 9, to this change in media coverage, public support for the war weakened greatly. Also, heavy exposure to the mass media was no longer associated with support for the war, but with a polarization of opinion that reflected the division in political discourse. Politically attentive liberals within the general public tended to adopt the position taken by elites conventionally recognized as liberal, while politically attentive conservatives in the general public moved toward the position of conservative opinion leaders.

So, when elites uphold a clear picture of what should be done, the public tends to see events from that point of view, with the most politically attentive members of the public most likely to adopt the elite position. When elites divide, members of the public tend to follow the elites sharing their general ideological or partisan predisposition, with the most politically attentive members of the public mirroring most sharply the ideological divisions among the elite.

These claims about the effects of elite discourse, which are an important part of what this book will attempt to demonstrate, are obviously quite strong ones. By way of further preliminary examination, I would like to give an overview of the evolution of American racial attitudes in the twentieth century. I strongly emphasize that my purpose in reviewing this sensitive subject is not to convince anyone of the final correctness of my view, but only to illustrate as clearly as possible the general vision that underlies the more specific arguments of later chapters.

Elite discourse and racial attitudes

At the turn of the century, the United States was a deeply racist society - not only in the caste structure of the southern states and in the widespread practice of discrimination, but in the political ideas that informed elite and mass thinking about race. Although there was some mainstream elite disagreement on the subject of race, it was confined to a very narrow range. Virtually all white elites accepted some notion of the inferiority of other racial groups (Frederickson, 1971). It is both distasteful and unnecessary to recount these ideas, but one point is important to the argument I wish to make. It is that racist ideas about blacks - and, indeed, about the most non-Anglo-Saxon groups, including Asians, southern and eastern Europeans, and Jews - had the support of the biological and psychological science of that period. Racist ideas, thus, were not confined to an extremist or backwater fringe; they were as common among the nation's white intellectual leaders as among other types of whites. Given this pattern of elite attitudes, any attempts to mobilize white support for black equality, whether by blacks themselves or sympathetic whites, were bound to fail.

By 1930, however, the attitudes of political elites seemed to be changing. In that year, President Hoover's nomination of John Parker of North Carolina to the Supreme Court was rejected in large part because of a ten-year-old speech in which Parker had said that "The Negro as a class does not desire to enter politics," and that the "participation of the Negro in politics is a source of evil and danger to both races." (cited in Kluger, 1975: p. 142). That a single racist speech, of a type that was entirely conventional throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, could become a basis for the rejection of a Supreme Court nominee by the Senate was an indication that attitudes toward race were undergoing a historic shift.

Despite this, race was apparently not a major public issue in the 1930s (Sheatsley 1966: p. 217). Moreover, Gunnar Myrdal (1944), in his massive investigation of American race relations, found that neither the material condition of blacks nor the amount of discrimination they faced were much different in
1940 than they had been in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. To the extent that there had been any improvement at all, it was only because some blacks had migrated to the North, where conditions had always been somewhat better. Nonetheless, Myrdal maintained that a period of great racial progress lay just ahead. White Americans believed deeply in their creed of equality and had come to realize that black demands for equality were justified. He therefore thought the days of white resistance to racial equality were near their end.

Thus, by Myrdal's account, which proved extraordinarily prescient, a change in white attitudes preceded any change in the actual conditions of blacks. What, then, brought about the attitude change?

One can imagine many possibilities, but Myrdal found the explanation in purely intellectual developments. Scientists, who as recently as 1920 had overwhelmingly endorsed the notion that some racial groups were superior to others, had, by their subsequent research discredited it. The magnitude of the change in scientific thinking is captured by the following two passages from the work of Carl Brigham, who was for a time a leading authority on race. In 1923 Brigham concluded his Study of American Intelligence by claiming flatly that "the intellectual superiority of our Nordic group over the Alpine, Mediterranean, and negro groups has been demonstrated" (p. 192). However, in a review of subsequent research that was published just seven years later, Brigham felt compelled to withdraw this conclusion. As he wrote in the final sentence of his paper,

This review has summarized some of the more recent test findings which show that comparative studies of various national and racial groups may not be made with existing tests, and which show, in particular, that one of the most pretentious of these comparative racial studies - the author's own - was without foundation. (Brigham, 1930: p. 165)

Reviewing this and other research, Myrdal wrote that "A handful of social and biological scientists over the past fifty years have gradually forced informed people to give up some of the more blatant of our biological errors" (p. 92). As Degler (1991) has recently shown, changing scientific theories of race in the 1920s were part of a much larger scientific movement away from biological explanations of human behavior.1

With the intellectual defeat of early theories of racial inferiority, psychologists shifted their research to the stigmatizing effects on blacks of what was now taken to be white prejudice, and to the origins of racial prejudice in various kinds of mental disorders and educational deficiencies (Allport, 1954).2

In consequence of all this, the stereotypes used to explain racial differences in material conditions underwent a major change. Until about 1930 these stereotypes stressed racial inferiority as the reason for inequality. Since then the
dominant tendency of elite discourse has been to blame inequality either on a failure of individual effort or, in its common liberal variant, on the effects of white discrimination against blacks. A more profound shift in elite discourse can scarcely be imagined.

Owing to the lack of opinion data until the late 1930s, the effects on public opinion of this revolution in elite discourse cannot be fully documented. But three points about public opinion are reasonably clear. First, there has been a massive shift toward greater public support by whites for the principle of racial equality. The shift has not extended as far as many would like - most notably, whites have resisted many government efforts to combat discrimination and have been even more opposed to most efforts to make up for the effects of past discrimination. Nor is the sincerity of some people's profession of belief in equality beyond question. But evidence of great change is hard to deny (Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo, 1985). For example, only 45 percent of whites in a 1944 survey said blacks "should have as good a chance as white people to get any kind of job," whereas in 1972, this figure had risen to 97 percent. Similarly, the percentage saying that "white students and black students should go to the same schools" rather than separate ones rose from 32 percent in 1942 to 90 percent in 1982. These changes may have begun to occur at the time of the first mass opinion polls on race in the early 1940s, or the changes may have been already under way at that time. In either case, the shift in mass attitudes roughly coincides with the shift in elite attitudes.

Second, the people most heavily exposed to the new elite discourse on race, namely the better educated, have been most likely to support those ideas that constitute the modern elite consensus on race. Thus, the better educated are not especially likely to support affirmative action or the more controversial efforts to combat inequality, such as school busing, which tend not to have consensual elite support; but they do exhibit disproportionate support for the principle of equality and for those efforts to combat discrimination, such as federal laws against segregated restaurants and transportation systems, that do enjoy mainstream elite support (Allport, 1954; Schuman et al., 1985). Thus, exactly as in the Vietnam case described earlier, exposure to elite discourse appears to promote support for the ideas carried in it. (I present further evidence on the relation between being liberal and thinking that exposure to elite discourse in Chapter 8.)

Finally, the public has been responsive to partisan elite cues on the subject of race. The evidence on this point, much of which comes from the recent work of Carmine D. Scrimin and Stimson (1989), is worth examining in some detail.

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, elite Democrats and Republicans exhibited no consistent partisan differences on racial issues. The Democratic Party was home to many prominent racial liberals, most notably Hubert H. Humphrey, and had, under the leadership of President Harry S Truman, pressed to achieve a measure of equality for blacks, especially in the military. Yet racially conservative Southerners remained a major power within the Democratic party. Meanwhile, the Republican President Dwight Eisenhower, though no crusader on race, appointed the racially liberal Earl Warren to be chief justice of the
The effect of this change in party leadership cues is apparent in the lower portion of Figure 2.1. Rank-and-file Democrats and Republicans began in 1964 to exhibit substantial amounts of party polarization on racial issues—the result, it would seem, of the sudden change in the structure of party leadership cues.3

There is, however, an ambiguity in these results. Mass polarization along party lines could have come about from a reshuffling of party loyalties, with racial liberals flocking to the Democratic Party and racial conservatives moving over to the Republican side. This is the party conversion thesis. Or polarization could have come about from opinion conversion, that is, existing Democrats becoming more racially liberal and existing Republicans becoming more racially conservative. This is the opinion leadership thesis. Although Carmines and Stimson make no attempt to sort out these competing possibilities, it appears that both processes were at work. Petrocik (1989) has shown that, beginning in 1964, the Democratic Party lost Southern whites and gained blacks, which indicates a reshuffling of party loyalties along lines of preexisting racial opinions. And Gerber and Jackson (1990) have shown that many existing Democrats and Republicans also changed their racial opinions to accord with the new party leadership cues, which indicates a mass response to elite opinion leadership.4

For purposes of this book, the latter phenomenon is the more important. If elite cues can change racial opinions, which appear to be among the most deeply felt of mass opinions (Carmines and Stimson, 1982; Converse, 1964; Converse and Markus, 1979), they can probably affect most other types of opinions as well.

Conceptualizing and measuring elite discourse

The political information carried in elite discourse is, as we have seen, never pure. It is, rather, an attempt by various types of elite actors to create a depiction of reality that is sufficiently simple and vivid that ordinary people can grasp it. This "information" is genuinely information in the sense that it consists of what may be assumed to be sincere attempts to capture what is most important about what is happening in the world and to convey it in its proper perspective. But it is never "just information," because it is unavoidably selective and unavoidably enmeshed in stereotypical frames of reference that highlight only a portion of what is going on.

In consequence, the public opinion that exists on a given issue can rarely be considered a straightforward response to "the facts" of a situation. Even topics that are within the direct experience of some citizens, such as poverty, homosexuality, and racial inequality, are susceptible to widely different understandings, depending on how facts about them are framed or stereotyped, and on

3 Actually, Carmines and Stimson (1989) find the first evidence of mass-level partisan polarization on race in a Harris poll taken in November 1963, which was just after President John Kennedy declared his support for a major civil rights bill.
which partisan elites are associated with which positions. In view of this, it is difficult to disagree with Lippmann’s observation that while the orthodox theory holds that public opinion constitutes a moral judgment of a group of facts . . . [it is more reasonable to hold that] . . . public opinion is primarily a moralized and codified version of the facts (1922/1946: p. 93).

Thus, when I refer in the course of this book to the “information carried in elite discourse about politics,” as I often will, I will be referring to the stereotypes, frames of reference, and elite leadership cues that enable citizens to form conceptions of and, more importantly, opinions about events that are beyond their full personal understanding. The aim of the book is to show how variations in this elite discourse affect both the direction and organization of mass opinion.

This conception of elite discourse, however, is more elaborate than can be fully measured and tested in this book. I have sketched it in order to indicate the larger picture into which my argument fits, and to acknowledge that elite discourse is a more complex phenomenon than my simple measures will make it out to be. For my measures really are quite simple and concrete. Often, I will make only a dichotomous measurement — whether there is a monolithic elite point of view on what a given issue is and how it should be handled, or whether there are important elite disagreements over the issue (see especially Chapter 6). In a few other cases, I will determine the relative intensity of opposing elite communications and how relative intensity changes over time. In these cases, I will be counting the number of media reports on a given issue, and the direction in which each report would tend to push opinion.

Yet, as much research has shown, even simple story counts are sufficient to show a close relationship between elite discourse and mass opinion (Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller, 1980; MacKuen, 1984; Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey, 1987; Fan, 1988; Page and Shapiro, in press; Brody, 1991). And, as the reader will see, they suffice equally well for the purposes of this book.

By way of illustration, let me briefly describe changes in news reports on the issue of U.S. defense spending in the late 1970s and early 1980s, along with the associated changes in public opinion that they appear to have produced.

On the cover of the October 27, 1980, issue of Newsweek was the headline, “Is America strong enough?” The inside story began as follows:

Seldom in time of peace has the United States been so troubled by talk of war — and so much concerned that the country is incapable of waging it. The Army Chief of Staff, General Edward C. Meyer, complains publicly that he presides over a “hollow army,” understaffed, undertrained, and underfunded. General Lew Allen, the Air Force Chief of Staff, warns that his planes lack the spare parts necessary to command the skies in any sustained fight. The Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Thomas B. Hayward, protests that he has a three-ocean mission and a “one-and-a-half ocean Navy.” And for the first time since the missile gap scare of the 1960 presidential campaign, a feeling is building that American defenses have slipped — so badly that the nation may no longer be capable of protecting its interests abroad, or containing Soviet expansionism.

Information, predispositions, and opinion

After what the magazine bluntly characterizes as inadequate responses to this situation by President Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, his Republican opponent in the fall election, the story continues:

There is little question that America’s defense posture is not what it could be — or should be. Much of the military’s equipment has aged to the point of obsolescence — and even the critical Minuteman ICBM’s and B-52 bombers need continuing and expensive maintenance to stay competitive. Skyrocketing operating costs have ravaged the services and hamstrung their training efforts. Low pay scales and increasingly long stretches of sea duty for sailors and overseas tours for soldiers and airmen have prompted a mass exodus of the experienced noncoms who are at the heart of any fighting force. These problems all raise legitimate questions about the ability of the U.S. military to react to crisis and perform in combat.

Stories of this type were not unusual in the late 1970s and early 1980s. By my count, in the 24 months prior to the 1980 election, Newsweek carried 57 stories that bore more or less directly on defense spending, 46 of which wholly or predominantly favored greater spending.

A pro-spending posture was not, however, a permanent feature of Newsweek coverage of defense issues. As the new Reagan administration began to increase the level of defense spending, elite discussions of the issue — most notably in the form of objections by many congressional representatives that defense spending was squeezing out social spending — changed dramatically, and as this occurred, Newsweek coverage of the issue assumed a radically different character. Now the magazine filled its columns with information about multimillion dollar cost overruns, $600 air force screwdrivers, and other indications of Pentagon mismanagement. Instead of images of a decrepit U.S. fighting force, the public was given pictures of a bloated and wasteful military. Thus, in the 24 months following the 1980 election, there were 60 stories on defense spending, 40 of which assumed a posture opposed to defense spending. So, over a short period of time, coverage swung from about four-to-one in favor of greater defense spending, to two-to-one in favor of reduced expenditures.

Public opinion on defense spending moved in tandem with these shifts in media coverage. At the end of the Vietnam War, most Americans wanted to cut defense spending, and as late as 1975, only about 10 percent felt too little money was being spent on defense. But, in response to a steady stream of pro-defense images of the type just described, support for such spending rose steadily in the late 1970s, so that by early 1981, a slight majority of Americans felt that "too little" was being spent on defense. Then, as the news media began carrying a preponderance of information against defense spending, support for greater spending fell by more than 30 percentage points within a single year, leaving public opinion lopsidedly against increased defense spending. Such changes in public opinion, linked to clear shifts in the information carried in elite discourse, are a central topic of analysis of this book, especially the latter half of it.
This section has suggested why and how elite discourse affects mass opinion. The next section will consider more carefully which members of the public are most susceptible to elite influence.

MASS ATTENTION TO ELITE DISCOURSE

Although most Americans are, to use Downs's (1957) apt phrase, rationally ignorant about politics, they differ greatly in the degree of their ignorance. There is a small but important minority of the public that pays great attention to politics and is well informed about it. Members of this minority can recognize important U.S. senators on sight, accurately recount each day's leading news stories, and keep track of the major events in Washington and other world capitals. They are, thus, heavily exposed to elite discourse about politics.

Any attempt to gauge the absolute size of this highly informed minority is essentially arbitrary (though see Bennett, 1989; Smith, 1989; Delip Carpini and Keeter, in press). Nonetheless, one indication of size is that when respondents to a National Election Study were asked to name as many members of the U.S. Supreme Court as they could remember, about 1.9 percent of the public could mention as many as half of the members, and a disproportionate number of those who could do so were lawyers or educators. Few Americans, it appears, are deeply familiar with the operation of their government. (By way of comparison, it is interesting to speculate what percentage of adults can name five or more starters on their city's major league baseball team; almost certainly, the figure is above 1.9 percent.)

At the other end of the attentiveness spectrum is a larger group of people who possess almost no current information about politics. In late 1986, for example, when George Bush was halfway into his second term as vice-president of the United States, 24 percent of the general public either failed to recognize his name or could not say what office he held. People at this level of inattentiveness can have only the haziest idea of the policy alternatives about which pollsters regularly ask them to state opinions, and such ideas as they do have must often be relatively innocent of the effects of exposure to elite discourse.

Most citizens, of course, fall between these extremes. Probably from some combination of civic obligation and the entertainment value of politics, a majority pays enough attention to public affairs to learn something about it. But even so, it is easy to underestimate how little typical Americans know about even the most prominent political events—also how quickly they forget what for a time they do understand. For example, in the spring of 1989, the speaker of the House of Representatives, James Wright, resigned the speakership amid allegations of scandal, the first time in American history that this had happened. The story was heavily covered in the media over a period of several months. Yet when, about three weeks after Wright's resignation, a national sample was asked about his resignation, only 45 percent could supply any reason for the resignation—even so much as a bare mention of scandal or wrongdoing. Or to take one other example: In the early summer of 1989, the U.S. Supreme Court announced a major decision on women's right to abortion, Webster v. Reproductive Services. Because pro- and antiabortion activists held large-scale demonstrations in an attempt to lobby the court, there was extensive news coverage of the impending decision in the weeks before it was taken, and very heavy coverage when the decision was finally announced. Yet, in a survey done just after the decision, only about 50 percent of the public could say anything at all about how the court had ruled, and, as the survey continued over the next several weeks, this percentage fell gradually to about 35 percent (Zaller and Price, 1990).

Those who did learn about the abortion decision were obviously not a random 50 percent of the population. Citizens who paid regular attention to politics were far more likely to learn about the abortion decision than those who didn't. Figure 2.2 makes this point. Respondents to the survey were rated according to their general background levels of "political awareness." Persons scored high on political awareness if they were able to correctly answer a variety of simple factual information tests (such as which political party controls the House of Representatives), whereas persons scored low on awareness if they could answer none of these questions. As can be seen in the figure, almost all of the most highly aware
informed persons — upward of 95 percent of those interviewed within the first three days of the Court’s decision — could, when asked, supply the rudiments of the Court’s ruling in the abortion case; but almost none of the persons at the low end of the awareness spectrum had absorbed any information about the decision.

Data such as these on differential attentiveness to political news have immense implications for the impact of elite discourse on mass opinion, and taking systematic account of them will be a central task of this book.

Figure 2.2 also shows that the people most strongly committed to women’s right to abortion — in particular, the minority who said women should have an absolute right to decide for themselves whether to get abortions — were more likely to find out about the court decision than other persons. Yet their informational advantage was rather modest. There was, moreover, no difference at all between men and women in awareness of the decision. Even women of childbearing age did not differ from the rest of the public in their awareness of this issue (Price and Zaller, 1990). I mention this in order to give pause to readers who may suspect that, although citizens are often poorly informed about politics in general, they still manage to learn about matters that are especially important to them. Although there is some tendency for this to occur, as emphasized in Converse (1964), Iyengar (1990), Delli Carpini and Keeter (1990), McGraw and Pinney (1990), and some other studies, the tendency appears not to be very great or very widespread (Price and Zaller, 1990).

The two main points about political awareness, then, are (1) that people vary greatly in their general attentiveness to politics, regardless of particular issues; and (2) that average overall levels of information are quite low. More succinctly, there is high variance in political awareness around a generally low mean.

These points are widely familiar to professional students of public opinion (Converse, 1975; Kinder and Sears, 1985; Lupkin, 1987; Bennett, 1989). Yet familiarity is often as far as it goes. Most of the time, when scholars attempt to explain public opinion and voting behavior, they build models that implicitly assume all citizens to be adequately informed about politics, and hence to differ mainly in their preferences and interests. In other words, they build models that ignore the effects of political awareness. One aim of this book is to provide a corrective for this dominant research practice.

It may be useful to give an example of why a corrective is needed. The example concerns the effects of campaigns on voting behavior in congressional elections, but the issues it raises parallel those concerning the effect of elite discourse on public opinion generally.

One of the most heavily researched problems in the congressional elections literature in recent years has been the advantage enjoyed by incumbents in the House of Representatives in their reelection bids. The average winning margin has increased dramatically in the past three decades, with the result that most House seats appear safe for the incumbent. House members have been able, by dint of their own efforts, to build a “personal vote” that is loyal to them regardless of partisan considerations. Thus it sometimes happens that a seat will be safe for a particular incumbent for a decade or more, but that when the incumbent retires, the seat will quickly become safe for a person of the opposite party. This development has given House members an independent standing that is almost unique among legislators in Western democracies and that seems to have vitally affected the performance of the American Congress (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina, 1987; Jacobson, 1991).

The reason for the rise of the personal vote, however, remains somewhat unclear. Less than half of the eligible electorate can recall the name of their congressional representative, and this figure has not changed in the period in which incumbents have become safer. But although most people cannot recall their incumbent’s name, about 80 percent can recognize it. This discovery has become the basis for a claim that much of an incumbent’s advantage occurs in the voting booth where voters are asked only to recognize rather than to recall who is serving as their member of Congress (Mann and Wolfinger, 1980).

The typical congressional election, thus, takes place in a low-information environment in which a few people know the name of the incumbent and perhaps something about his or her record; many others can, with a prompt, recognize the incumbent’s name and perhaps hazily recall one or two facts about the person’s record or background; and still others know nothing at all about the incumbent.

These differences in political awareness greatly affect the capacity of incumbents to develop a “personal vote” among their constituents — and yet they are typically ignored in research on the subject. In consequence, the dynamics of the personal vote have remained murky. To preview arguments that are more fully developed in Chapter 10, the people who know most about politics in general are also most heavily exposed to the incumbent’s self-promotional efforts. Yet, as political sophisticates, they are also better able to evaluate and critically scrutinize the new information they encounter. So in the end, highly aware persons tend to be little affected by incumbent campaigns. If they share the party and values of the incumbent, they will support the incumbent whether he or she campaigns vigorously or not; if they do not share the incumbent’s values, they will refuse to support him or her no matter how hard he campaigns. Meanwhile, at the low end of the awareness spectrum, those who pay little attention to politics tend to get little or no information about congressional politics. Hence they are also relatively unaffected by the efforts of the incumbent to build a personal following. This leaves the moderately aware most susceptible to influence: They pay enough attention to be exposed to the blandishments of the incumbent but lack the resources to resist.

Evidence on this point is shown in Figure 2.3, which depicts the relationship between political awareness and the chances that people will desert their own party to vote for an incumbent member of Congress rather than their own
standing the effects of elite discourse on preference formation requires modeling the effects of awareness in mediating exposure to each of the major campaign messages in the environment, a task that presents serious complications.

A final complication, as has already been suggested, is that opinion formation is a multistage process, and awareness may affect different parts of the process differently: Political awareness is associated with increased exposure to current communications that might change one's opinion, but it is also associated with heightened capacity to react critically to new information. These two effects may be cross cutting, as in the case of congressional elections, where the most aware persons are most heavily exposed to the incumbent's campaign but also most resistant. But this needn't be the case. There are, as we shall see, cases in which the most aware persons are the easiest segment of the public to reach and persuade, and other cases in which very inattentive persons are most susceptible to persuasion. Systematically explaining these and other ways in which political awareness affects public opinion and voting behavior will be the most important single contribution of this book.

In view of the central importance of political awareness, it is worthwhile to digress briefly to consider how best to conceptualize and measure it. Political awareness, as used in this study, refers to the extent to which an individual pays attention to politics and understands what he or she has encountered. Attention alone is not enough, since people who, for example, watch the TV news while lying on the couch after dinner and a couple of glasses of wine will typically fail to enhance their political awareness.

The key to political awareness, then, is the absorption of political communications. Political awareness denotes intellectual or cognitive engagement with public affairs as against emotional or affective engagement or no engagement at all. Scholars have used a wide variety of concepts and measures to capture what is here being called political awareness. The concepts in the research literature include political expertise, cognitive complexity, political involvement, attentiveness, sophistication, and political acuity. Although choice of labels is perhaps mainly a matter of personal or disciplinary taste, my reason for preferring political awareness is that this term, better than the others, seems to capture the key processes in the model to be introduced here, namely an individual's reception and comprehension of communications from the political environment.

Scholars have also used several different types of questions to operationalize what I am calling political awareness. These include media exposure, political participation, education, and self-described interest in politics. As I argue in the Measurement Appendix, political awareness is, for both theoretical and empirical reasons, best measured by simple tests of neutral factual information about politics. The reason, in brief, is that tests of political information, more directly than any of the alternative measures, capture what has actually gotten into people's minds, which, in turn, is critical for intellectual engagement with politics. Typical information questions, as suggested earlier, ask which political

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Figure 2.3: Defections to House incumbent among partisans of outparty. See the Measures Appendix for a description of the measure of political awareness. Source: 1978 NES survey.

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9 There are three reasons for the small number of cases in Figure 2.3: First, the voting rate in off-year congressional elections is relatively low, even among NES respondents; second, the figure involves only members of the party not holding the given congressional seat; and third, uncontested and open seat races have been eliminated.
party controls the House of Representatives, or whether Mainland China is a member of the United Nations.

Thus the information tests used to assess political awareness in this book are strictly neutral or factual. This point is stressed because, as indicated earlier, much of the information carried in elite discourse is neither neutral nor strictly factual. A news report implying that the Pentagon is awash in scandal and mismanagement, or a presidential remark to the effect that most unemployed persons could get jobs if they tried hard enough, constitute factual information in that they may contain some simple facts, and that they convey sincerely held beliefs about factual states of affairs. Yet they are not neutral, since they have been framed for partisan purposes and can be reasonably disputed by fair-minded people. Some kinds of assertions, such as the claim that the spread of abortion signifies a degradation of American morals, are not even fully susceptible to empirical verification; yet the broadcast of this claim in the media would constitute a broadcast of information, since it would involve an assertion about the actual state of the nation.

Nonneutral and not necessarily factual information, thus, is indistinguishable from political argumentation. Neutral factual information, such as which party controls Congress, is important in this book insofar as it measures a person's likely level of exposure to this other, nonneutral and not exclusively factual information.

To avoid confusion between information of the neutral and nonneutral types, I will from this point onward use information exclusively in its nonneutral sense, as in "information about the deterioration of American morals." Instead of referring to tests of neutral factual information, as is measured in measuring political awareness, I will simply refer to tests of political awareness or political knowledge.

In order to remind the reader that information is normally used in its nonneutral sense, I will occasionally place the term in quotes. Also, for aesthetic reasons, I will sometimes substitute cognates of attentiveness for awareness, as in "politically inattentive," "politically unaware."

**POLITICAL PREDISPOSITIONS**

Citizens differ greatly in their levels of exposure to elite discourse, but these exposure differences can, by themselves, explain only a part of the variance in individual opinions. For citizens are more than passive receivers of whatever media communications they encounter. They possess a variety of interests, values, and experiences that may greatly affect their willingness to accept — or alternatively, their resolve to resist — persuasive influences.

In this book, I refer to all of these factors as political predispositions, by which I mean stable, individual-level traits that regulate the acceptance or nonacceptance of the political communications the person receives. Because the totality of the communications that one accepts determines one's opinions (by
One of these weaknesses will be centrally addressed in this book, but the second must be provisionally resolved by assumption.

The first limitation is that, like most public opinion research, the current literature on values largely fails to take systematic account of the vast differences in political awareness that exist among citizens. This failure is unfortunate because a frequent claim of the values literature has been that citizens who are, as most scholars agree, too unsophisticated to possess "ideologies" nonetheless possess sufficient awareness to make reliable use of "values" to structure their policy preferences. Thus, in a leading example of this research, Hurwitz and Peffley (1987) propose a hierarchical model of foreign policy opinions in which "core values" determine individuals' "general postures," which in turn determine opinions on particular foreign policy issues. The fact that many Americans are quite ignorant of foreign affairs is, according to Hurwitz and Peffley, precisely the reason that individuals must often fall back on core values and general postures to instruct their policy preferences:

we see individuals as attempting to cope with an extraordinarily confusing world . . . by structuring views about specific foreign policies according to their more general and abstract beliefs. (p. 1114)

Although this point is an excellent one, citizens must still possess some minimal degree of information in order to recognize the relevance of their values for a given issue, and, as I have been arguing, it is quite easy to underestimate how often even minimal political information may be absent for some citizens.

By way of illustration, we may examine opinions toward the U.S. policy of aid to the Contra rebels in Nicaragua. Figure 2.4 shows how citizens who differed in both their political awareness and in their predisposition toward use of military force responded in 1987 to a question on this topic. The persons classified as "hawks" in the figure are ones who said, over a set of general questions, that they strongly value military strength, an aggressive posture toward potential adversaries, and uncompromising opposition to communism. "Doves" are persons who rejected these positions, preferring to emphasize negotiations and accommodation with communism. Political awareness in the figure is measured by simple tests of factual knowledge about politics. (Items used in scale construction may be found in the Measures Appendix.)

The left side of the figure shows that politically aware hawks and doves differ greatly on the question of whether U.S. "aid to the Contras in Nicaragua" should be increased, decreased, or kept the same: Forty-two percent of the most aware hawks, but only 3 percent of the most aware doves, favored increased Contra aid. However, among persons in the middle third of the awareness scale, hawks and doves differed only modestly, and among persons at the bottom of the scale, there were no value-based differences at all - a result that raises doubts whether the hawk-dove value dimension has any utility for understanding the views of poorly informed persons.

However, the right-hand side of Figure 2.4 supports the conventional view of the importance of values. It shows responses to a question about whether the United States should send troops "to stop the spread of communism" in Central America. Here we find sharp differences between hawks and doves at all levels of awareness.

Why the difference in response pattern to the two items, especially among less politically aware persons? The likely explanation is the contextual information carried in the two questions: The first, although scarcely lacking in clarity, requires respondents to know who the Contras are and what they stand for. This requirement will often go unmet among persons who are, in general, poorly informed about politics. (Commercial surveys taken in 1985 indicated that only about half of the American public knew which side the United States was supporting in the fighting in Nicaragua.) The second question in Figure 2.4, by mentioning communism, makes clear what the value implications of the issue are, thereby enabling people inclined toward hawkish foreign policies to recognize and support them.

Thus, the impact of people's value predispositions always depends on whether citizens possess the contextual information needed to translate their values into support for particular policies or candidates, and the possession of such information can, as shown earlier, never be taken for granted. This contingency in the relationship between values and support for particular policies or candidates underlies this entire study, whose purpose, as I have indicated, is to show
how individuals use information from the political environment to translate their values and other predispositions into more specific opinion statements.

A second shortcoming of the values literature arises from its failure, so far, to specify the nature of the theoretical relationship of different value continua to one another and to political ideology. The problem arises from the fact that, although there are numerous "value dimensions" between which there is no obvious logical connection, many people nonetheless respond to different value dimensions as if they were organized by a common left–right dimension. There is, in other words, a tendency for people to be fairly consistently "left" or "right" or "centrist" on disparate value dimensions as economic individualism, opinions toward communists, tolerance of nonconformists, racial issues, sexual freedom, and religious authority. The correlations among these different value dimensions are never so strong as to suggest that there is one and only one basic value dimension, but they are always at least moderately strong, and among highly aware persons, the correlations are sometimes quite strong. 13 And, of course, there are also moderately strong correlations between people's self-descriptions as liberal or conservative and their scores on the various values measures.

What, then, is the nature of the relationship between "values," as examined in recent research, and "ideology," which an earlier generation of researchers took so seriously? In view of the empirical covariation among measures of the two concepts, the question seems an obvious and important one.

Let "values" be defined, as they normally are, as domain-specific organizing principles, such as economic individualism, where each value dimension lends structure to public opinions within a particular domain. "Ideology" may then be defined as a more general left–right scheme capable of organizing a wide range of fairly disparate concerns, where the concerns being organized include various value or issue dimensions or both.

These definitions closely link the two concepts without, as far as I can see, violating the conventional meaning of either term. There are, however, two significant novelties. First, the various value dimensions are no longer conceptually independent; rather, each is one among several correlated dimensions of a master concept, ideology. Second, ideology is no longer the strictly unidimensional concept that many discussions have considered it to be, but a constellation of related value dimensions.

The dimensionality of ideology may be analogous, in a certain respect, to the dimensionality of human intelligence. As a large psychological literature has shown and as common experience confirms, it is mistaken to say that there is a single dimension of intelligence. Thus, we all know people who are better at some kinds of tasks than others—mathematical reasoning rather than verbal expression, to take the most obvious case. Yet it is rare to find someone who is very high on one dimension and very low on another—a brilliant writer who

13 For evidence of the breadth of attitudes apparently organized by the left–right dimension, see Monroe, 1990; McClosky and Zaller, 1984: chap. 7.

cannot do simple addition and multiplication, or a great mathematician who cannot also generate fluent written prose. A person who is extraordinarily high on one dimension of intelligence tends to be at least fairly high on others. A similar thing appears to be true for ideology. It is unusual to encounter a person who is very liberal on one dimension of ideology and extremely conservative on another. 14 There is a tendency, which is clear but not overpowering, for people to stake out roughly comparable positions on a series of seemingly unrelated left–right value dimensions.

There are two practical implications of this view for the measurement of predispositions in this study. First, one should, whenever possible, use appropriate domain-specific measures of political values, rather than a general measure of ideology, as the operational measure of citizens' predispositions to accept or reject the political communications they receive. The reason is that ideology, as the more general measure of people's left–right tendencies, is more likely to miss reactions to a particular issue than is an indicator that has been tailored to that issue.

The second implication of this analysis is that, since values are, to a significant extent, organized by a person's general ideological orientation, one can, if necessary, use general or omnibus ideology measures to capture people's left–right tendencies. And often it is necessary. Much of this book focuses on cases of opinion change, but there are relatively few cases of mass opinion change that have been captured by high-quality, publicly available surveys. Hence, I must make full use of what little good data on opinion change are available. In some of these datasets, there are excellent measures of political values that capture exactly the value dimensions that regulate the opinion change. But in other cases, a survey may have only a very general measure of value orientation, such as liberal–conservative self-identification, or measures of value orientations that are not particularly close to the opinion that is undergoing change. In cases of this kind, I develop the best measure of general left–right tendency that I can and go ahead, hoping that one such measure may be, in practice, almost as good as another. (The measures employed are always generally described in the text of the book and exactly described in the Measures Appendix.) The justification for this practice, beyond sheer necessity, is the notion that there is a general left–right organizing principle that runs through many different value dimensions.

This practice is obviously a conservative one. To the extent that general measures of value orientation fail to capture a predisposition that is related to the opinion undergoing change, I will tend to get weak or nonexistent relationships with values. And indeed, some of the relationships I have found appear weaker than I believe they would be if stronger value measures were available.

Finally, a note on terminology. At some points in this study I will describe individuals as "liberal" or "conservative." In so doing, I will never mean to
imply that the people so designated are necessarily full-fledged, doctrinaire ideologues of the left or right. I will mean only that the people tend to be closer to the left or right pole of some particular value dimension, or closer to one or the other pole of the constellation of associated liberal–conservative values. Thus, rather than say that a person is high on a measure of equalitarianism or high on a measure of hawkishness, I may say that the person is liberal or conservative. But whichever term I use, the important point to remember is that, for purposes of this book, values and ideology have exactly the same theoretical status: They are indicators of predispositions to accept or reject particular political communications.

WHAT IS AN OPINION?

John Mueller begins his study of *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (1973) with a series of caveats that ought to appear on the opening pages of every book on public opinion, but which rarely do. He writes:

The interview situation is an odd social experience. The respondent, on his doorstep or in his living room, is barraged with a set of questions on a wide variety of subjects by a stranger, usually a rather well-educated woman over 30, who carefully notes each response on a sheet of paper. Few people are accustomed to having their every utterance faithfully recorded and many find the experience flattering. And, aware that their views are being preserved for the ages, they do not wish to appear unprepared at that moment. Under these circumstances it is not surprising to find respondents pontificating in a seemingly authoritative, if basically “truthful,” manner on subjects about which they know nothing or to which they have never given any thought whatsoever. . . . (p. 1)

The consequences of asking uninformed people to state opinions on topics to which they have given little if any previous thought are quite predictable: Their opinion statements give every indication of being rough and superficial. The opinion statements vacillate randomly across repeated interviews of the same people (see Table 2.1; also see Converse, 1964; Achen, 1975; Dean and Moran, 1977; Erickson, 1979; Feldman, 1989; Zaller, 1990); entirely trivial changes in questionnaire construction, such as switching the order in which questions in which answers or response options are listed, can easily produce 5 to 10 percentage point shifts in aggregate opinion, and occasionally double that (Schuman and Presser, 1981; Bishop, Oldendick, and Tuchfarber, 1984; Tourangeau et al., 1989); and different ways of phrasing questions regularly have large effects on measured levels of public support for an issue. For example, Rasinski (1989) reports that, over several surveys, 68 percent of Americans felt too little money was being spent on “hurting the rising crime rate,” but that only 55 percent felt too little was being spent on “law enforcement.” Similarly, 68 percent felt that too little was being spent on “protecting social security,” but only 53 percent felt this way about spending on “social security.” Or, in another type of case, 45 percent of Americans would “not allow” a communist to give a speech, whereas only 20 percent of Americans would “forbid” the same behavior (Schuman and

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*The question was: Some people feel it is important for us to try very hard to get along with Russia. Others feel it is a big mistake to try too hard to get along with Russia. People were asked to place themselves on a 7-point scale. Points 1, 2, and 3 have been counted as "cooperative"; 4 as middle; 5, 6, and 7 as "tougher."*  
*b The question was: "Some people think the government should provide fewer services, even in areas such as health and education, in order to reduce spending. Other people feel it is important for the government to continue the services it now provides even if it means no reduction in spending."*  

*Source: 1980 NES panel survey.*

Presser, 1981: p. 277). A record instance of the effects of changes in question wording may be a *New York Times* poll in 1983 which found that public support for a “freeze” on nuclear weapons production, at that moment a topic of heated interest, varied between 18 percent and 83 percent, depending on how the issue was framed.  

It is easy to think of reasons why few analysts of public opinion follow Mueller's example in exhibiting this catalogue of horrors in their opening pages. The most obvious is that they fear being dismissed out of hand, losing their audience before any argument has been made, if they too candidly reveal the dubious nature of the data on which their study depends. But a more important reason, I believe, is that no one knows quite what to make of the multiple vagaries of mass opinion. Most analysts truly believe that public opinion is a more substantial entity than is indicated by the evidence just cited — and yet the gloomy indications are all too real. Being unable to square all the facts with what one believes is true, one simply puts aside the troubling evidence for the time being, leaving it to survey methodologists to work out, and writes about those aspects of public opinion one does understand.  

An obvious problem with this approach is that it conceals information from the reader. Another is that it relinquishes the opportunity of making realistic statements about how mass opinion, in all of its elusiveness, forms and changes.

In view of these considerations, the present study will make no effort to hide or underplay the types of problems with opinion data that have just been described. Indeed, it will make a theory of why the problems exist an integral part of its analysis. The theory is more simplistic than I would like, but it will at least address the problems head on.

This approach is a gamble. Placing at the center of the book a theory of the nature of public opinion—a subject that neither I nor anyone else fully understands—ties its entire argument to some weak reeds, giving critics an opportunity to complain, correctly, that its foundations are uncertain. Whether the returns on this risky strategy, the opportunity to sketch a unified and realistic treatment of the dynamics of public opinion, have been worth their cost will be up to the reader to decide.

Let me begin this part of my argument by recounting in more detail the vagaries of mass political opinion to which I have alluded; the relatively narrow-gauge theories by which scholars have sought to explain some of these phenomena; and the more general theory that I will use to explain these findings and to integrate them into a model of the effect of elite discourse on mass opinions.

Problems with mass opinion reports: Over time instability

Table 2.1 gives two typical examples of response instability over time. The first question, from a sample of respondents who were interviewed in January and again in June of 1980, asks whether the United States should try harder to cooperate with the Soviet Union, our Cold War adversary, or whether we should get tougher. As can be seen, 60 percent of those who favored a tougher stand in January still took this position in June; the rest were scattered across the other three options (greater cooperation with Russia, a middle position, or “no opinion”). Of those who took a neutral middle position in January, only 24 percent still did so in June, with most of the rest now favoring either more cooperation or less. Altogether, only 50 percent of the respondents took the same position in June that they had taken in January. (If everyone were simply guessing each time he was asked the question, roughly 32 percent would be expected by chance alone to state the same opinion on successive interviews, given my recoding of the item.) The same tendencies are apparent in the second question, which concerns the proper level of government services. Here, some 35 percent of the survey respondents managed to state the same opinion on successive interviews.

One obvious interpretation of these flip-flops is that many people undergo genuine opinion change between interviews. The evidence, however, fails to support this interpretation. When the same respondents are asked the same question on three different occasions, one can typically predict their opinion on the third interview as well from the first interview as the second. If changes between the first and second interviews represented systematic opinion change, this would not be possible. The generally accepted conclusion, therefore, has been that response instability of the type shown in Table 2.1 predominantly represents some sort of chance variation. But what sort of chance variation, and why so much of it?

In his famous paper on “The nature of belief systems in mass publics,” Converse (1964) argued that opinion instability is due mainly to individuals who lack strong feelings on the given issue but nevertheless indulge interviewers by politely choosing as best they can between the response options put in front of them—often choosing in an essentially random fashion. “[L]arge portions of an electorate,” he suggested, “simply do not have meaningful beliefs, even on issues that have formed the basis for intense political controversy among elites for substantial periods of time” (1964: p. 245).

This conclusion has been strongly challenged by scholars who contend that, although people’s “survey responses” fluctuate greatly, citizens have underlying “true attitudes” that are overwhelmingly stable (Achen, 1975, 1983; Dean and Moran, 1977; Erikson, 1979; Judd and Milburn, 1980; Judd, Milburn, and Kronick, 1981; Feldman, 1989; Zaller, 1990; an exception is Kronick, 1988; for general reviews, see Kinder and Sears, 1985 and Smith, 1984). The fluctuations that appear in people’s overt opinion statements are attributed to “measurement error,” where such error is said to stem from the inherent difficulty of mapping one’s preexisting opinions onto the unavoidably vague language of survey questions.

The theory of measurement error has an especially attractive implication. If one believes that attitudinal variables have been measured with large amounts of random error, it follows that their correlations with other variables will be artificially deflated. And if this is so, it is legitimate to deflate these depressed correlations by means of standard psychometric techniques, which researchers routinely do. Thus, attitudinal variables which, in fact, exhibit high instability over time and low correlations with other variables are made, by means of correction procedures, to appear almost perfectly stable and highly correlated with other variables. In this way, the problem of response instability is rendered not only innocuous but invisible.

Both the Converse and measurement error approaches to response instability appear to have deficiencies. Converse’s thesis, which takes any instability as evidence of a “nonattitude,” was an extreme claim intended to characterize opinions only on certain highly abstract issues. On more typical issues, as Converse and Markus (1979) argue, people’s opinions may be more or less “crystallized” and are, as a result of this, more or less stable. But this only raises the question of what exactly crystallization consists of. Since no one has ever said, opinion crystallization remains more a metaphor than a testable theory of opinion stability (Kronick and Schuman, 1988).

The newer “measurement error” theory of response instability seems equally underspecified at its theoretical core. When, as all estimates agree, measurement “error” normally constitutes one-half to three-quarters of the variance
of opinion items, one naturally wonders what this chance ‘error’ consists of and how it has been generated. Yet researchers have been remarkably uncritical about this problem. In a large majority of cases in which it is acknowledged, analysts make a statistical correction for it and move quickly on to whatever their study is mainly about. As a result, “measurement error” is closer to being a euphemism for “unexplained variance” than it is to being a well-understood phenomenon (see, however, Schuman and Presser, 1981; Krosnick and Berent, 1992).

**Problems with mass opinion reports: “Response effects”**

A second embarrassment to the conventional view of opinions has been the discovery of substantial amounts of nonrandom or “systematic error” in people’s opinion reports. Many respondents react to the context in which a question is asked, to the order in which alternative responses are presented, and to wholly nonsubstantive and trivial alterations in questions. The systematic effects of such seemingly irrelevant features of the interview process are known as “response effects.”

Consider a well-known experiment during the 1970s on Americans’ opinions toward Soviet journalists. In a split-half sample, 37 percent of respondents were willing to allow Communist reporters in the United States. Yet when, in the other half-sample, respondents were first asked whether U.S. reporters should be allowed in Russia (which most favored), the percentage agreeing to allow Russian reporters into the United States nearly doubled to 73 percent. The explanation for this huge difference, as Schuman and Presser (1981) suggest, is that when people are asked the Communist reporters item alone, they respond on the basis of anti-Communist opinions. When, however, the question is preceded by one about American reporters working in Russia, a norm of reciprocity is immediately made salient and a substantial number of respondents feel bound to provide an answer that is consistent with their previous response. ... The crux of the matter seems to be that the reporter questions have two meanings, one involving an attitude toward an object and another involving an attitude toward a norm. (p. 28)

Note that this explanation implicitly abandons the notion that individuals possess a single, fixed opinion toward the rights of Communist reporters. Rather, individuals are assumed to have at least two considerations, one involving Communists and the other involving the norm of fair play, and to answer the question according to whichever consideration has been made salient by the questionnaire.

There are numerous other findings of this type: People are less likely to describe themselves as interested in politics just after they have been asked about obscure issues (Bishop et al., 1984); people’s opinions toward abortion are affected by the kinds of items (concerning, for example, religion or women’s rights) that precede it (Tourangeau and Rasinski, 1988; Tourangeau et al. 1989); people give quite different answers to open-ended questions than to questions that ask them to choose among a series of prespecified options (Schuman and Scott, 1987).

**Question-wording effects**

It is uncommon for a change in question order to shift public opinion by more than 10 or 15 percentage points, and many shift opinion by smaller amounts or not at all. Changes in the substantive wording of questions can, on the other hand, produce much larger effects on political opinions and can do so much more reliably. Yet these changes are not normally considered either worrisome or even especially interesting. The feeling seems to be that differently worded questions should get different answers, since they change either the emotional loading of the issue or, in some cases, what the respondent is being asked about.

It is not clear, however, that this complaisance is warranted. It is, for example, well established that adding the endorsement of a prominent politician to a policy question -- as in, “Do you favor or oppose President X’s policy of...?” -- is likely to change the public’s response to that issue, depending on the popular view of President X. But if, as conventional opinion models assume, citizens have preexisting “true attitudes” that they merely reveal to the inquiring pollster, such “endorsement effects” should not occur. The fact that they do occur, and quite reliably, indicates that many respondents are making up their opinions -- or at least editing and modifying them -- as they go through the questionnaire.

Consider another type of question wording effect. In his study of support for the Korean War, Mueller (1973) found that people were more likely to express support for the war if the antiwar option required them to confess that their country had made a mistake by entering the war. Similarly, support for the war was consistently 15 to 20 percentage points greater if the war was described as necessary to stop communism. When both factors were at work, their joint impact on opinion was considerable. Thus, in one poll taken in the fall of 1953, only about 38 percent of the public said that “the Korean War has been worth fighting”; but in another poll taken at about the same time, 64 percent said that the United States “did the right thing in sending troops to stop the Communist invasion” (Mueller: table 3.1). As Mueller remarked, these data suggest somewhat conflicting observations. On the one hand, support for the war was clearly tied to the anti-Communist spirit in America at the time. To generate a kind of war fever, one merely had to toss the words, “Communist invasion,” into the discussion. On the other hand, the Communist element was not entirely built into the response to the war because Americans had to be reminded of it before their anti-Communism was fully activated... (Mueller 1973, pp. 46-8)

So, we again find out that a sizable fraction of survey respondents appear to form their opinions during the interview on the basis of the ideas made salient to them by the question, rather than simply revealing preexisting “true attitudes.”
The counterargument to this conclusion—that different questions were involved and should therefore be expected to produce different answers even if people did have preexisting opinions—does not seem to me credible. The issue that people were addressing—the appropriateness of the U.S. response to an invasion of South Korea by the Communist government of North Korea—was the same whether or not the survey question used the critical phrase, “Communist invasion.” Thus, anyone who had a fixed opinion on the war should have been able to express it whether communism was mentioned or not.

A clear demonstration that changes in question wording can change people’s responses even when the underlying issue remains exactly the same may be found in Tversky and Kahneman’s (1982) case of the rare Asian disease. These two psychologists put the following questions to a sample of college students:

Imagine the U.S. is preparing for the outbreak of an unusual Asian disease, which is expected to kill 600 people. Two alternative programs have been proposed. Assume that the exact scientific estimates of the consequences of the programs are as follows:

If program A is adopted, 200 people will be saved.

If program B is adopted, there is a one-third probability that 600 people will be saved, and a two-thirds probability that no people will be saved.

Which of these two programs do you favor?

This problem requires respondents to choose between a certain fixed loss and a gamble having an identical expected loss. In this case, 72 percent chose the certain loss, that is, saving 200 persons via program A. Yet when a comparable sample was asked in a differently worded question to respond to precisely the same dilemma, the results were radically different. In the second sample, the alternatives were described as follows:

If program C is adopted, 400 people will die.

If program D is adopted, there is a one-third probability that nobody will die, and a two-thirds probability that 600 people will die.

In this situation, only 22 percent chose the certain loss of 400 lives—a reduction of 50 percentage points. The conclusion to be drawn from this example, as from earlier ones, is that differences in the wording of questions can determine how people think about and hence respond to issues even when, as here, the denotative meanings of the competing wordings are exactly the same.

The need for a model of the survey response

There are, to reiterate, two types of evidence that weigh against the conventional notion that individuals have preexisting attitudes that they simply reveal in response to survey questions. The first is the widely replicated finding that 50 to 75 percent of the variance in typical opinion items is random “error”—an amount that is too large to be comfortably ascribed to the effects of vaguely worded questions. The second is the evidence of large amounts of systematic “error” arising from the effects of question order and question wording.

Information, predispositions, and opinion

These findings are more than methodological curiosities. They seriously undermine the conventional view that surveys are passive measures of “what the public really believes.” More ominously, they raise the fear that a large fraction of what opinion researchers measure is either random or systematic “noise.”

In the last fifteen years, survey methodologists and social psychologists have recognized this problem and sought to deal with it. They have tended to abandon the conventional notion that people possess fixed opinions that they simply reveal in surveys, and have begun to concentrate instead on the “question-answering process” by which individuals construct opinion reports in response to the particular stimuli that confront them.

In a recent example of this research, Wilson and Hodges (1992) describe the traditional view of attitudes as being essentially a “file drawer” model of attitudes:

When people are asked how they feel about something, such as legalized abortion, their Uncle Harry, or anchovies on a pizza, presumably they consult a mental file containing their evaluation. They look for the file marked “abortion,” or “Uncle Harry,” or “anchovies,” and report the evaluation it contains.

But Wilson and Hodges (1992) reject the general validity of this model. “People often construct their attitudes, rather than simply reporting the contents of a mental file.” Their attitude reports are based on the ideas in a large but internally conflicted “database,” so that the “attitude” that is reported at a given time is a “temporary construction” which depends on peculiarities of the process by which a person has constructed it.

Wilson and Hodges are not the only researchers to entertain such radical notions. In a prominent 1988 paper, Tourangeau and Rasinski also abandoned the traditional view of political attitudes and proposed to replace it with a general model of the “question-answering” process by which people construct attitude statements. I will deal further with their model later on.) Similar though more modest steps have been taken by Schuman and Presser (1981), Bishop et al. (1984), Iyengar and Kinder (1987), Bartels (1988), Kinder and Sanders (1990), and Popkin (1991).

Unfortunately, most research on the new “question-answering models” has tended to focus on response effects, and has had nothing to say about either random response instability or the larger process by which people form their opinions in response to information gleaned from the political environment. What is therefore needed is a broader question-answering model.

This is what I attempt to provide in this book. Like a fair number of survey methodologists and psychologists, I abandon the conventional but implausible view that citizens typically possess “true attitudes” on every issue about which a pollster may happen to inquire, and instead propose a model of how individuals construct opinion reports in response to the particular stimuli that confront them. This model unites in one theory an account of how people acquire information about politics, as sketched in the first part of this chapter, with an account of how they use that information to formulate responses to typical survey questions.
items. The model is consistent with – indeed, it seeks to provide explanations for – the vagaries of the mass survey response, as outlined in these pages.

The argument, first made in a 1984 convention paper (Zaller, 1984b), is roughly as follows: People are continuously exposed to a stream of political news and information, much of it valenced so as to push public opinion in one direction or the other. But, owing to the generally low levels of attention to politics in this country, most people on most issues are relatively uncritical about the ideas they internalize. In consequence, they fill up their minds with large stores of only partially consistent ideas, arguments, and considerations. When asked a survey question, they call to mind as many of these ideas as are immediately accessible in memory and use them to make choices among the options offered to them. But they make these choices in great haste – typically on the basis of the one or perhaps two considerations that happen to be at the ‘top of the head’ at the moment of response.

The basic claim of the model, thus, is that survey responses are a function of immediately accessible ‘considerations,’ where the flow of information in elite discourse determines which considerations are salient. The reason for response instability, on this view, is that different considerations happen to be salient at different times, which causes people’s survey responses to differ over repeated interviews. Changes in question order or question wording can bring about systematic changes in the considerations immediately salient to people, and hence systematic changes in their survey responses.

By way of illustrating the operation of the model, consider how typical citizens might have responded to a question about the proper level of U.S. defense spending during the cold war. Most would have heard a fair amount about the issue without ever having had the occasion to answer a survey question about it. They might have been upset about reports of Pentagon waste and mismanagement, but they might also have worried about the Soviet threat and America’s capacity to contain it – all without thinking about or even recognizing the trade-offs between these competing concerns. When unexpectedly asked on a survey for their opinion on defense spending, they must have, in just a second or two, somehow pulled these and other thoughts together into a ‘survey response’ on defense spending. In doing so, they did not fully canvass their minds for all relevant thoughts. Rather, if they had happened the night before to see a news program on a major defense procurement scandal, they might answer the question on the basis of that consideration. But if, on the other hand, they had been reminded by an earlier question about the threat of Soviet aggression they might instead answer that defense spending should remain high. And if, in a follow-up survey sometime later, the survey questions were asked in a different order, or if they had seen a different TV program the night before, they might have had different ideas at the tops of their heads and hence made different survey responses.

16 This useful description, which will recur many times in this book, is owed to Taylor and Fiske (1978).

An important feature of the model is that people who are more politically aware are more selective about the ‘information’ that they internalize – which is to say, they will be more likely to reject ideas that are inconsistent with their values. As a result of this selectivity, the ideas they internalize are more internally consistent and more consistent with their values. Responses to closed-ended survey questions reflect this by exhibiting greater over time stability and greater ideological consistency with one another.

Background of the question-answering model

Although the suggestion of a question-answering approach to understanding mass opinions is still novel within the public opinion field, it is approaching the status of orthodoxy in some psychological circles. It is instructive to review some of the research on which this emerging orthodoxy rests.

One strand of this research, conducted by mathematical psychologists and focusing on problem solving, regards the mind as a sort of bin filled with multiple interpretive constructs. Confronted with a set of ‘stimulus elements’ (raw sensory impressions) in a problem, individuals stochastically search their minds for constructs that enable them to make sense of the stimuli (Atkinson, Bower, and Crothers, 1965). An interpretive construct, once chosen, determines one’s understanding of the stimuli and hence one’s response to it. A person’s judgments, thus, depend quite directly on the ideas that happen to come to the top of the mind at critical points in the problem-solving exercise.

Another research tradition, common among social psychologists and mainly concerned with social cognition, focuses on the organization of ideas in the mind. A central concept in this research is ‘schema,’ a term that has been adapted from cognitive psychology. A schema is a cognitive structure that organizes prior information and experience around a central value or idea, and guides the interpretation of new information and experience.

A critical point about schemata is that people typically have several of them available for understanding any given phenomenon. For example, an individual being introduced to a ‘forty-year-old professor’ would react quite differently if the same person were instead introduced as ‘a forty-year-old mother of three.’ That is, different associations would come to mind, different qualities of the person would be noticed, different conclusions would be drawn from the person’s mannerisms, and so forth. In short, the perceiver’s ‘attitude’ toward the person would be different. Thus Tesser (1978), in statements that nicely capture a central feature of the model being suggested, writes:

An attitude at a particular point in time is the result of a constructive process... And, there is not a single attitude toward an object but, rather, any number of attitudes depending on the number of schemata available for thinking about the objects.

[Persons do not have a single feeling or evaluation of an object. Feelings vary depending upon the particular cognitive schema we "tune in." (pp. 297–8, 307, emphasis in the original)]
The key idea in these studies is that individuals do not typically possess "just one opinion" toward issues, but multiple potential opinions. The logical next question is then how, in the face of this, people manage to come to decisions at all.

This turns out to be an immensely complicated issue, involving the encoding of incoming information, perception or interpretation of information, efficiency of memory search, and degree of motivation, among other things. Thus, psychologists attempting to come to grips with these various issues have proposed models that are fearfully complicated (e.g., Wyer and Srull, 1989).

One point that does, however, appear reasonably clear is that, in the course of making decisions, including those involving political matters, individuals rarely take the time to canvass their minds for all relevant thoughts. Life is too short and the human mind too fallible. Rather, they appear to make decisions "off the top of the head" on the basis of whatever ideas are immediately accessible in memory. Thus, as Taylor and Fiske (1978) note, numerous studies have shown that the introduction or emphasis of a single piece of information — such as the fact that a particular person is a woman or a lawyer — can greatly affect subsequent expressions of opinion. Reviewing a variety of such evidence, Taylor and Fiske maintain, in an argument quite novel for its time, that many people make social judgments by seizing on

a single, sufficient and salient explanation . . . often the first satisfactory one that comes along . . . [1] Instead of employing base rate or consensus information logically, people are more often influenced by a single, colorful piece of case history evidence. . . . Instead of reviewing all the evidence that bears upon a particular problem, people frequently use the information which is most salient or available to them, that is, the information which is most easily brought to mind. (p. 251)

On the basis of a much larger volume of evidence, Wyer and Srull (1989) maintain that people are unlikely to conduct an exhaustive search of memory for all of the knowledge they have accumulated that is relevant to a particular decision. Rather they retrieve and use only a small subset of this knowledge, apparently assuming that its implications are representative of all the knowledge they have acquired. (p. 81)

Yet, at the same time, much data in political science (Kelley, 1983), political psychology (Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh, 1989), and cognitive psychology (Anderson, 1974) make it clear that individuals may often utilize many diverse pieces of information in their decision making. For example, Kelley (1983) shows that voters decide between presidential candidates as if they were summing up numerous "likes" and "dislikes" about each party and candidate and choosing the one with the highest net total. Anderson's information-averaging models, which have achieved wide recognition in psychology, likewise show that individuals make use of a wide set of relevant cognitions in formulating opinion statements.

The model I propose tries to accommodate both top-of-the-head decision making, as suggested by Taylor and Fiske, and averaging across potentially large amounts of disparate information, as suggested by Kelley and by Anderson. It does so by assuming that individuals make decisions by averaging over a non-random but stochastic sample of relevant considerations, where the size of the sample of considerations may vary between 1 and large. The size and composition of this sample depend on a variety of contextual and individual motivational factors, such as what ideas have been made salient by the questionnaire and how much attention a person generally pays to the subject at hand.

SUMMARY

This study focuses on interactions among three broad classes of variables: Aggregate-level variation in the information carried in elite discourse includes elite cues about how new information should be evaluated, individual-level differences in attention to this discourse, and individual-level differences in political values. Interactions among these variables determine the mix of "considerations" that gets into people's heads. Which of these considerations is available at the top of the head at the moment of confronting survey questions determines responses to the questions. A model based on these ideas is presented in the next chapter.
How citizens acquire information and convert it into public opinion

The comprehensive analysis of public opinion requires attention to two phenomena: how citizens learn about matters that are for the most part beyond their immediate experience, and how they convert the information they acquire into opinions.

This chapter proposes a model of both phenomena. The model does not provide a fully accurate account of how people process information and form attitude statements. No model that is both parsimonious and testable on typical mass opinion data—the two most important constraints on my enterprise—could possibly do so. But the proposed model, as I hope to persuade the reader, does a plausible job of approximating what must actually occur, and a quite excellent job of accounting for the available survey evidence across a wide range of phenomena.

Having stated a model of the opinionation process in this chapter, I proceed in the rest of the book to test a series of propositions derived from the model. Some additional ideas will be needed to accomplish this, but they are few and incidental. All of the important features of my analysis derive from the model that is presented here.

SOME DEFINITIONS

I begin the statement of the model with definitions of primitive terms. The first is consideration, which is defined as any reason that might induce an individual to decide a political issue one way or the other. Considerations, thus, are a compound of cognition and affect—that is, a belief concerning an object and an evaluation of the belief. “President Bush’s plan to balance the federal budget is fair to all competing interests” is an example of a consideration that might impel an individual to say, in response to a survey question, that she approves of the way President Bush is handling his job as president. The cognitive element in this consideration is information about Bush’s tax plan, and the affect is the favorable evaluation of it.2

Suppose that someone sees on the TV news the image of a “bum on the street” reacts with hostility, and makes this hostility the basis of an opinion statement opposing increased government spending on the homeless. It might initially seem that this hypothetical opinion statement is based on a purely affective response rather than a blend of cognition and affect. Yet a cognitive component is clearly present: The person on the street has been seen as a “bum” rather than “a person like myself who has unfortunately lost his job.” Thus, the negative evaluation depends on a particular cognitive representation of what one has seen, which is to say, a combination of cognitive and affective elements.

Although much more could be said about considerations, particularly their possible role in guiding perception, the concept in its present spare form suffices for a great many purposes, as will become apparent.3

Second, I define two types of political messages: persuasive messages and cueing messages. Persuasive messages are arguments or images providing a reason for taking a position or point of view; if accepted by an individual, they become considerations, as the term was just defined. A speech by a Democratic politician charging that “President Bush’s budget plan is a sham and a delusion” is an example of a persuasive message.

Note that there is nothing in this account that implies that either political messages or the considerations that result from them must be solely rational. On the contrary, messages may involve subtle or even subliminal images, and considerations may involve feelings or emotions. Thus, a president may seek to project a “message” of competence in his public presentations, in the hope that it will make the public feel warm or secure. If the president is cognizant in this way, and if this cognitive representation generates feelings of security that positively influence how citizens evaluate the president’s job performance, the feelings of security must be counted as reasons for favorably evaluating the president—that is, as considerations. I wish to underscore these points because, although the model I propose has a cognitive flavor, it is, in principle, as capable of dealing with nonrational appeals and inarticulate feelings as with other kinds of political discourse.

2 In many cases the evaluation associated with a consideration is implicit rather than explicit, as in “The Pentagon wastes a lot of money,” a piece of “information” that almost everyone would accept as reflecting unfavorably on the need for more defense spending.

3 There is a temptation simply to borrow the psychological concept of a schema and use it in place of the term “consideration.” Yet “schema” is not quite right for my argument. For one thing, the concept stresses cognition rather than affect. However suitable this may be in other domains of life, it is not suitable in politics, where people appear to make decisions on the basis of ideas that are affectively charged. Consideration, defined as a reason for favoring a position, is perhaps idiosyncratic, but the term has the critical advantage of combining cognition and affect. Also, consideration has an everyday meaning that is more compatible with the political analysis of public opinion than terms such as schema.
Cueing messages, which are the second type of message carried in elite discourse, consist of "contextual information" about the ideological or partisan implications of a persuasive message. The importance of cueing messages is that, as suggested by Converse (1964), they enable citizens to receive relationships between the persuasive messages they receive and their political predispositions, which in turn permits them to respond critically to the persuasive messages. Thus, a Republican voter will be more likely to reject criticism of President Bush’s budget plan if she recognizes that the person making the criticism is a Democrat.

We saw a clear illustration of the importance of cueing information in the last chapter, where politically unaware hawks and doves were unable to make a partisan response to a question about aid to the Contra guerrillas in Nicaragua because they apparently lacked contextual information about who the Contras were. These same hawks and doves could, however, respond in partisan fashion to a question about combating communism in Central America because communism was a cue they understood.

**THE MODEL**

The model itself consists of four assertions, or axioms, about how individuals respond to political information they may encounter. Each is stated first as a general theoretical position and then elaborated and justified in more precise terms.

As will become apparent, none of the axioms is individually original, nor can it be said that any of the four axioms is a perfect representation of what occurs in the world. I hope, however, to show that the axioms, taken as a group, have some highly novel and empirically correct implications, and also that, even though not perhaps perfectly true, the axioms are quite plausible approximations of the processes that must actually occur as individuals acquire information about politics and use it to formulate statements of their political preferences.

A1. **RECEPTION AXIOM.** The greater a person’s level of cognitive engagement with an issue, the more likely he or she is to be exposed to and comprehend – in a word, to receive – political messages concerning that issue.4

The messages people may receive include all types: that is, persuasive messages and cueing messages.

In specifying the reception axiom in terms of cognitive engagement rather than, say, strength of feeling about an issue, the model obviously stresses the cognitive aspect of exposure to political communications. There are two reasons for this. The first is that, as indicated, the model is most centrally concerned with how individuals acquire information from the environment and convert it into opinion statements. These are essentially cognitive processes, so that affective engagement is likely to be able to affect them only insofar as it leads to

4 These terms derive from McGuire, 1969.
far as that axiom is concerned, political communications may originate in elite discourse, in purely personal exchanges among friends and neighbors, or in other ways. All that is claimed in A1 is that reception of politically relevant communications, whatever their origin, is positively associated with intellectual engagement with a given issue. By extension, political awareness is assumed to capture propensity for reception of political communications generally, regardless of their point of origin.

It would obviously be desirable to be able to measure exposure to interpersonal influence independently of exposure to elite discourse in the mass media. However, it is not possible to do so from the available data. Some surveys do carry measures of people's self-reported frequency of personal discussion of politics, but there is, as with measures of political awareness, no guarantee that they would capture exposure to only one type of communication.

Thus, the reader should bear in mind that the assumption that it is the information carried in elite discourse, rather than personal influence or something else, which shapes mass opinion is not a part of the formal model that I am laying out in this chapter. It is, rather, an auxiliary assumption that requires independent justification, as I have sought to provide in the first part of Chapter 2 and will provide in parts of the analysis reported below. I extensively discuss this point in my closing evaluation of the book's argument in Chapters 11 and 12.

A2. RESISTANCE AXIOM. People tend to resist arguments that are inconsistent with their political predispositions, but they do so only to the extent that they possess the contextual information necessary to perceive a relationship between the message and their predispositions.

The key to resistance, in this formulation, is information concerning the relationship between arguments and predispositions, where the requisite information is carried in cueing messages. According to the Reception Axiom, the probability of individuals acquiring cueing information depends on their levels of awareness of each given issue. Thus, A1 and A2 together imply that the likelihood of resisting persuasive communications that are inconsistent with one's political predispositions rises with a person's level of political attentiveness. Or, to put it the other way, politically inattentive persons will often be unaware of

5 Price and I (1990) have found that, although frequency of political discussions with one's peers has a moderate bivariate relationship with the likelihood of reception of particular current news items, discussion has no impact once habitual political awareness is controlled. Even self-reported media use has little impact on measured news reception once general awareness is controlled. Neither of these findings, however, indicates anything about the sources of the news that individuals have received.

It might be suggested that if media use and frequency of political discussion were used instead of rather than in addition to general political awareness, it would be possible to distinguish their relative importance. The difficulty with this idea is that media exposure is extremely unreliable measured in typical surveys—much less reliably than the generally high alpha reliability statistics of indices of media exposure would indicate. In consequence, substituting media use for political awareness results in dreadfully anemic results even when strong media effects are clearly present, as Price and I (1990) show. I suspect that the actual reliability of self-reported frequencies of political discussion would, if carefully investigated, prove low as well.

Converting information into public opinion

the implications of the persuasive communications they encounter, and so often end up "mistakenly" accepting them.

This postulate makes no allowance for citizens to think, reason, or deliberate about politics: If citizens are well informed, they react mechanically to political ideas on the basis of external cues about their partisan implications, and if they are too poorly informed to be aware of these cues, they tend to uncritically accept whatever ideas they encounter.

As normatively unappealing as this implication of the model may be, it is consistent with a large body of theory and research concerning political persuasion. Philip Converse, the leading theorist of mass opinion, maintains that few people reason for themselves about how political ideas relate to one another. Rather, to the extent that individuals respond critically to the political ideas they encounter, they rely on contextual information from elites about how different ideas "go together" and thereby "constrain" one another (Converse, 1964). Although he does not say so, the contextual information that Converse describes would surely include the particular groups or leaders who favor or oppose an idea.

A central point in Converse's analysis is that awareness of contextual information is likely to depend on general levels of political awareness. Hence, only people attaining fairly high levels of awareness are likely to respond to communications in a manner that is "constrained" by their values.

The psychological literature on opinion change lends great support to the notion that individuals typically fail to reason for themselves about the persuasive communications they encounter. Instead, people rely on cues about the "source" of a message in deciding what to think of it. Reviewing this evidence in an influential 1969 article, William McGuire wrote:

The given message is judged as fairer, more factual, more thoroughly documented, its conclusion following more validly from its premises, and even more grammatical, when it is ascribed to a high- as opposed to a low-credibility source. (p. 198)

Although the studies McGuire cites do not necessarily involve political sources that are Democrat or Republican, or liberal or conservative, they ought to generalize to these kinds of sources (see, for example, Belknap and Campbell, 1951–2; Mueller, 1973; Price, 1989).

McGuire goes on to note that people do not seem to learn more from credible sources; they simply tend to accept their opinion leadership more readily. This pattern, he continues,

suggests again that the receiver can be regarded as a lazy organism who tries to master the message contents only when it is absolutely necessary to make a decision. When the purported source is clearly positively or negatively valenced, he uses this information as a cue to accept or reject the message's conclusions without really absorbing the arguments used.

6 As operationalized below, the model will not require that inattentive citizens accept all ideas they encounter; it requires only that they be more accepting than highly aware persons, and that they not be able to respond selectively to issues on the basis of their predispositions. However, the empirically estimated acceptance rates (given exposure) of uninformed people turn out to be very high; see Figures 7.4 and 10.1.
Recent research has sketched a somewhat more encouraging picture of the critical capabilities of the "receiver." For example, Rhine and Severance (1970) have found that college students pay no attention at all to credibility of the source when the topic of the message is one that engages their interest, which in this case was whether college tuition should be raised. Source effects, these researchers found, were limited to non-"ego-involving" issues, such as how much land should be set aside for parks in a distant community.

Most recently, the work of Chaiken (1980) and Petty and Cacioppo (1986) has provided clear support for the view that individuals will, under certain circumstances, entirely ignore such factors as "source credibility" and instead base their attitudes on the quality of the persuasive information they have been given. A typical Petty and Cacioppo experiment runs like this: Underclass college students are presented with persuasive arguments on a topic of potentially great interest to them—whether senior comprehensive exams should be a requirement for graduation. This is an idea that, needless to say, undergraduates are predisposed to resist. Half the students are exposed to "strong" arguments for comprehensive exams, such as the example of a university that instituted such exams and then found that the starting salaries of its graduates rose $4,000 over a two-year period, and the argument that law schools give preference to students from schools having the senior exam requirement. The other half of the students are given "weak" arguments, such as the arguments that many colleges are considering the exams, so the school could be at the forefront of a national trend, and that graduate students, who must take comprehensive exams, feel it is only fair that undergraduates should have to take them too. In each of these conditions, half the students are told that the proposal is to institute the new requirement the following year, so that it would apply to them ("high-involvement" condition) and half are told that the requirement is being considered for possible adoption in ten years ("low-involvement" condition). Finally, half the students are told that the source of the arguments they are getting is a Princeton professor (a "high-credibility" source) and half are told that the arguments have been taken from the report of a local high school class (a "low-credibility" source). The experimental design, thus, is two message types × two involvement conditions × two source types.

The results are as follows: Low-involvement students pay some attention to the quality of the arguments but are most strongly affected by the credibility of the sources advocating them; hence they are favorable toward comprehensive exams only when the source advocating them is a Princeton professor. High-involvement students, by contrast, pay no attention to source credentials, but are powerfully influenced by the strength of the arguments. Thus, they are very favorable to senior comprehensive exams when the arguments for them have been good and strongly negative otherwise. Petty and Cacioppo are able to show, in addition, that the different reactions of the high- and low-involvement students are due precisely to the fact that the former have thought more extensively about the arguments being made.

One wishes one could be confident that the general public were as good at detecting weak arguments as were Petty and Cacioppo's "high-involvement" college students. But the reasons for doubt are great.

First, the weak arguments used in Petty and Cacioppo's experiments were extremely weak, sometimes comically so. It took systematic effort to develop such weak but still coherent arguments, and political persuaders in real life cannot be expected to take similar pains. Bad as the arguments of many politicians may be, politicians (and their media consultants) try to be persuasive. In cases of real-life political controversy, citizens are likely to face two sets of opposing arguments that, when compared to those of a typical Petty and Cacioppo experiment, will all be "strong."

Second, most politics, at least in the contemporary United States, is notoriously low key and uninviting. The stakes are theoretically high, but people find it hard to stay interested. (The evidence on this point was reviewed in Chapter 2.) In such "low-involvement" conditions, Petty and Cacioppo's work indicates that most people engage in "peripheral" message processing, that is, processing that ignores the intrinsic quality of arguments and uses superficial cues such as source credibility as the basis for accepting or rejecting messages.

Third, the students in the Petty and Cacioppo experiments were judging issues that were rooted in their everyday experiences. (Other issues Petty and Cacioppo use are tuition increases and liberalization of dormitory visiting hours.) With respect to issues like these, virtually all students are fully capable, without any particular past attention to the issues, of responding in the manner of informed experts. This condition does not even remotely hold for most political issues, where the information and judgment necessary to reach reliable conclusions is beyond the direct experience of even the most attentive persons.

Thus, the conditions that make possible Petty and Cacioppo's encouraging findings—weak arguments, and "receivers" who are both involved in and well-informed about the issue at hand—are simply not present in typical situations of mass persuasion. On the contrary, real-world conditions, according to the work of Petty and Cacioppo and that of others, encourage reliance on peripheral cues, such as whether the person advocating a position is liberal or conservative, a union leader or a priest, or whatever (Belknap and Campbell, 1951–2; Campbell et al., 1960; Key, 1961; Mueller, 1973; Price, 1989; Gerber and Jackson, 1990; Pollock, Lisle, and Vities, 1991; Page and Shapiro, in press).

There is, then, solid empirical support for the assumption that citizens normally respond to new information on the basis of external cues concerning the implications of that information for their values and other predispositions, provided that, as Converse emphasizes, they are sufficiently attentive to politics to have learned the cues.

Having stated a strong argument for why political awareness should be associated with resistance to persuasion, let me now state an equally strong caveat: The argument applies only to cases in which the contextual information necessary to evaluate an issue in light of one's predispositions is, for one reason or
another, obscure. Thus, as we saw in Chapter 2, steadfast anticommunists were quite able to state opinions consistent with their predispositions when they were asked about “stopping communism” in Central America. It was only when they were asked about “aid to the Contras,” an obscure reference, that they had trouble. To take another example, one would expect strong age-related differences, independent of political awareness, in responses to a question about tax social security benefits. The reason is that virtually everyone, even the least politically aware, would possess the contextual information necessary to answer this question in relation to their predispositions, in this case, nearness to retirement age.

The extent to which contextual information is obscure may depend either on the nature of the issue—race, as Converse pointed out, is one area in which most people can understand what is at stake—or on the way a question is phrased, as in the example of aid to the Contras.

Generally speaking, the more abstract the link between a predisposition and a related policy issue, the greater the amount of knowledge necessary to perceive the linkage, or the more complicated the chain of reasoning involved, the more important political awareness is likely to be in regulating individual responses to political communications on that issue. Conversely, the more simple and direct the link between a predisposition and an issue, the less important awareness is likely to be in regulating responses to political communications on that issue.

Although it is important to note that awareness can be expected to enhance resistance to persuasion only when the full significance of the issue or survey question is of a different degree, this qualification by no means robs the resistance axiom of its bite. Obscurity, in the sense I have indicated, is extremely common in politics.

A3. ACCESSIBILITY AXIOM. The more recently a consideration has been called to mind or thought about, the less time it takes to retrieve that consideration or related considerations from memory and bring them to the top of the head for use.

Conversely, the longer it has been since a consideration or related idea has been activated, the less likely it is to be accessible at the top of the head; in the limit, a long unused set of considerations may be completely inaccessible, which is to say, forgotten.

This axiom appropriates for use in the model one of the best-established empirical regularities in cognitive psychology. General support for the basic idea is overwhelming and, as far as I can tell, undisputed. When an idea or concept has been recently used, seen, heard, or indirectly referenced, it is significantly more likely to be available for use than if it has not been recently activated (for reviews, see Higgins and King, 1981; Wyer and Srull, 1983).

Note, however, an element of ambiguity in this axiom. Although specifying that use of one consideration can increase the accessibility of related considerations, it says nothing about what it means for different considerations to be related. I am therefore implicitly relying on common understanding to determine when considerations are related to one another.

A4. RESPONSE AXIOM. Individuals answer survey questions by averaging across the considerations that are immediately salient or accessible to them.

This axiom, which completes the statement of my proposed model, implies that persons who have been asked a survey question do not normally canvass their minds for all considerations relevant to the given issue; rather, they answer the question on the basis of whatever considerations are accessible at the top of the head. In some cases, only a single consideration may be readily accessible, in which case individuals answer on the basis of that consideration; in other cases, two or more considerations may come quickly to mind, in which case people answer by averaging across accessible considerations.

An important feature of the Response Axiom is that it permits different people to respond to issue questions on the basis of different considerations—one, for example, emphasizing ideological concerns, another gut-level likes and dislikes, and yet another self-interest. This renders the model consistent with a growing literature indicating that such interpersonal heterogeneity is quite common (Grabber, 1984; Rivers, 1988; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, 1991; Hollis, 1991).

Many readers will suspect that the top-of-the-head Response Axiom is too simple—as, indeed, it surely is. Psychologists working with data from laboratory studies and from experimentally controlled surveys have developed more complex and hence presumably more realistic models of how individuals proceed and reach decisions.

For example, Tourangeau and Rasinski (1988) have proposed a four-stage model in which individuals (1) interpret the question to determine what the issue before them really is, (2) canvass their minds for relevant thoughts, (3) integrate their thoughts into a coherent opinion, and (4) map that opinion onto the response options available in the question. Because features of the questionnaire can affect each of these steps, the questionnaire also affects what gets reported as public opinion.

Although the Tourangeau and Rasinski model is still fairly simple, it may nonetheless be too complex for use in the context of mass opinion survey data. I say this because it is quite consistent with the evidence that Tourangeau and Rasinski cite that their four-stage process has only one important step: the retrieval from memory of a dominant consideration. So, for example, a conservative who happens to think about a government services question in terms of “welfare cheats” may already have done all he needs to do in the way of canvassing his mind for beliefs, integrating them into a coherent opinion, and mapping the opinion onto the given response options. Tourangeau and Rasinski are aware of their limited ability to distinguish empirically the steps in their model with survey data and do what they can to combat it. But my point remains that complex models may have only limited utility for general analyses of public opinion.
Models that are still more complex, such as the forty-three postulate information-processing model proposed by Wyer and Srull (1989), are even more dubious in the context of public opinion data. Analysts of mass opinion can profitably use such models for heuristic guidance in devising their models, but, in the end, it is necessary to make radical simplifications if the purpose is to engage in the rigorous analysis of typical public opinion data.

If there is a threat to my simplified top-of-the-head Response Axiom, it comes from recent psychological studies of “on-line” information processing. The argument here is that people do not form their attitude statements from ideas accessible at the moment of response but instead use a “judgment operator” to continuously update their attitudes as they acquire new information; people are said to store these updated attitudes in memory and retrieve them as required by a given situation, including interview situations (Hastie and Park, 1986; Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh, 1989).

Although a fair amount of evidence supports the on-line model, there are strong reasons for doubting that it holds generally within the domain of political attitudes. These reasons are best discussed after the evidence supporting my model has been presented. For the moment, however, I briefly note two of the most important. The first is that it is wildly unrealistic to expect citizens to use each piece of incoming information to update all of the “attitudes” to which it might be relevant. Thus, for example, a news story about the suffering of homeless people, in the idealized world of on-line processing, require updates of attitudes toward the welfare system, the value of big government, the efficiency of capitalism, the president’s attempts to trim welfare spending, voluntary charity, the American way of life, among others—which is to say, many more subjects that a person could possibly rethink at the moment of encountering each new piece of political information. The second reason for doubting the applicability of the on-line model to political attitudes is that this model, with its notion that attitudes are simply “retrieved” from memory and reported to the inquiring interviewer, is quite obviously just a restatement of the conventional “true attitude” model, a model that, as I have been at pains to show, is simply not capable of accommodating the available evidence on the nature of mass political attitudes.

The survey responses that people make within the proposed model may reasonably be described as attitudes or opinions, in that they represent people’s true feelings at the moment of answering a given survey question; they could not, however, be described as “true attitudes,” in the technical sense of the term, because survey responses are not assumed to represent anything more than a single aspect of people’s feelings toward a given attitude object.

Perhaps the most apt description of a survey response within the proposed model is “opinion statement.” This term implies that the expression of opinion is genuine without also implying that it either represents prior reflection or is destined for a long half-life. The phrase “attitude report” has similar virtues.

Opinion statements, as conceived in my four-axiom model, are the outcome of a process in which people receive new information, decide whether to accept it, and then sample at the moment of answering questions. For convenience, therefore, I will refer to this process as the Receive-Accept-Sample, or RAS, Model.

HOW THE MODEL IS USED IN THIS BOOK

The model I have outlined consists of four very general claims about how people acquire information from the political environment (in the form of persuasive arguments and cues) and transform that information into survey responses. In the remainder of the book, I use these axioms to explore and explain numerous aspects of mass opinion. In particular, I will use the axioms to explain the distributions of mass opinion that may be expected to occur in various kinds of political environments—for example, a political environment in which people are exposed to two equally intense streams of competing liberal and conservative messages on a given issue; a political environment in which most of the messages one-sidedly favor a given issue; and an environment in which the proportions of liberal and conservative messages are changing, thereby producing attitude change in the mass public. The four axioms, standing by themselves, have limited analytical utility; but they come to life under these various configurations of the flow of political information.

The method of the book, then, is to develop the deductive implications of the four basic axioms for a given, highly specific set of conditions; review evidence indicating whether or not these implications are empirically correct; and present new evidence as necessary and possible to resolve outstanding empirical questions.

At a few points in the analysis, it will be necessary to supplement the four axioms in nonfundamental ways. For example, I will need in Chapter 7 to stipulate a functional form for the relationship between political awareness and reception of political messages. More and less complicated operational models will also be built from the axioms at various points in the book, depending on the strength of the data available to test the models. But no significant new substantive claims about public opinion will be introduced. The burden of the book will be to show how various aspects of public opinion, some well-established and some novel, can be deduced from the four axioms, given particular information flows—that is, particular streams of liberal and conservative communications—in the political environment.

The argument to be made from the RAS model may be previewed as follows. It follows from the Response Axiom that the probability that a person will support or oppose a given policy depends on the mix of positive and negative considerations available in the person’s mind at the moment of answering a question about it. If, for the moment, we overlook the probability of nonresponse (which occurs when no considerations are immediately salient in memory), and assume
also that every consideration a person has internalized is as likely to be sampled as any other, then the probability of a liberal response by a given person is

\[ \text{Prob}(\text{Liberal response}) = \frac{L}{L + C} \]

where \( L \) and \( C \) refer to the number of liberal and conservative considerations available in the person's mind. (I reiterate here, as elsewhere in this book, liberal and conservative are simply labels for the directional thrust of ideas; a person may use a liberal consideration as the basis for a liberal response even though she is not, in any deeper sense, "a liberal.")

The balance of liberal and conservative considerations in people's minds depends on both society-level and individual-level variables. The key societal variables are the intensities of liberal and conservative information flows in the political environment with respect to a given issue. The key individual variables are political awareness and political predispositions. More aware persons will be exposed to more political communications (via the Reception Axiom) but will be more selective in deciding which communications to internalize as considerations (via the Resistance Axiom). Thus, politically aware citizens will tend to fill their minds with large numbers of considerations, and these considerations will tend to be relatively consistent with one another and with the citizens' predispositions. Less aware persons will internalize fewer considerations and will be less consistent in doing so. As a result, more aware people will be more likely to be able to state opinions, and more likely to state opinions that are ideologically consistent with their predispositions.

Changes in the relative intensity of liberal and conservative communications on an issue will produce changes in the kinds of considerations people form, which will in turn produce changes in the opinion statements they make. One of the things that gives the RAS model its strength is its ability to forecast that different segments of the public will change their attitudes in different amounts and even different directions, depending on their political awareness, their political values, and the particular changes in information flow that have occurred.

Thus, the four basic postulates of the sampling model, unprepossessing as they are, entail quite definite claims about how public opinion forms and changes, as we will now begin to see.

4

Coming to terms with response instability

Respondents to the 1987 NES pilot study were asked to answer what academic analysts of public opinion will recognize as an entirely standard question:

Some people think the government in Washington should cut government services, even in areas such as education and health care, in order to reduce the deficit. Others think government services should be increased.

In an unusual twist, however, respondents to this survey were not permitted to give an immediate answer to the question. Instead, the interviewer continued:

Before telling me how you feel about this, could you tell me what kinds of things come to mind when you think about cutting government services? (Any others?)

The interviewer wrote down respondents' remarks verbatim, and then asked:

Now, what comes to mind when you think about increases in government services? (Any others?)

At this point, the original question was repeated and the respondents were, at last, permitted to render a simple dichotomous judgment on the matter of government services. But in the meantime, each individual had revealed what the issue of government services meant to him or her at the moment of answering a standard closed-ended question about it. Because every respondent was asked the same questions again four weeks later, these probes make it possible to see how their thinking on the issue might have changed over time. The open-ended comments elicited by these probes constitute some of the best evidence currently available about what citizens' survey responses mean and why they are so beset by vagaries.

As it happened, I was at the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center when completed interviews from this study began to arrive from the field office.¹ The first pair of these interviews involved a person who described himself—or herself, I have no way of knowing—as a teacher, and who spoke quite emphatically in favor of higher levels of services and spending. The country was

Parts of the analysis in this and the next chapter are from my and Stanley Feldman's report of results from the 1987 NES pilot study, as published in Zaller and Feldman (in press). The theory underlying this analysis is from Zaller (1984b).

¹ Because I had helped to design these unusual questions, I was present to help supervise their administration and to watch for problems.
Table 8.7. Coefficients for opinion formation on school desegregation, economic news, nuclear freeze, and Korea

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>School desegregation</th>
<th>Nuclear freeze</th>
<th>Economic news</th>
<th>Korean War</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reception function</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>-1.02</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>1.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.32)</td>
<td>(.31)</td>
<td>(.28)</td>
<td>(.41)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Acceptance function</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
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<td>2.05</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>3.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
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<td>-0.61</td>
<td>-0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.40)</td>
<td>(.22)</td>
<td>(.34)</td>
<td>(.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age*</td>
<td>-0.038</td>
<td>-0.008</td>
<td>-0.033</td>
<td>-1.60</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.017)</td>
<td>(.008)</td>
<td>(.01)</td>
<td>(1.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic policy attitudes (standardized)</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.23)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign policy attitudes (standardized)</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.22)</td>
<td>(.20)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reagan job approval (range - 2 to + 2)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.08)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party attachment (range - 2 to + 2)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.66</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(.16)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic attitudes (standardized)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(.13)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote in 1948* (1 = Dewey, 0 = Truman)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.77</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(.60)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>848</td>
<td>1400</td>
<td>1413</td>
<td>596</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Model for all issues is Equation 7.5, estimated by maximum likelihood. Dependent variables are 0–1, as follows: disagreement that the federal government should stay out of school desegregation (V74); support for joint or unilateral freeze (V305); statement that economy has improved in last year (V327); disagreement that the United States "should get out of Korea now and stay out." Other political variables are coded in liberal direction, except vote for Dewey; see Measures Appendix for additional information. Standard errors are shown in parentheses.

*Age was entered in years, except for Korea, where a five-point cohort variable on 0–1 range was used because age in years was unavailable.

Sources: For school desegregation, 1956–58–60 CPS study; for freeze and economic news, 1982 NES survey; for Korean War, 1951 CPS survey.

Two-sided information flows

Until this chapter, I have modeled attitude change as a response to a one-sided stream of communications – for example, the negative effects of Iran–Contra on presidential popularity, or the argument for liberal internationalism in the post–World War II era. Much has been learned about the dynamics of attitude change from this approach because, in many cases, the flow of political communications really is, at least for a time, heavily one-sided. Yet it is rarely completely one-sided over any appreciable length of time. Even amid the Iran–Contra scandal, for example, some Republican senators defended the president, and their remarks may have had some effect in preventing even greater damage to President Reagan’s approval ratings.

The burden of this chapter is to develop a model that is capable of capturing the effects of two-sided information flows which change public opinion – that is, information flows that consist of both a dominant message pushing much of public opinion in one direction, and a less intense, countervailing message that partly counteracts the effects of the dominant message. Such a model is possible because, as will be shown, dominant and countervailing messages can have different effects in different segments of the population, depending on citizens’ political awareness and ideological orientations and on the relative intensities of the two messages.

But the larger purpose of this chapter is to integrate the work of earlier chapters into a general statement of the effect on mass opinion of two-sided information flows. We saw in Chapter 6 that when elite discourse one-sidedly favors a given policy, it produces a ‘‘mainstream pattern’’ in which the most aware members of the public subscribe to the elite consensus most strongly, and further, that when elite discourse divides along partisan lines, the effect is to generate a ‘‘polarization’’ of mass opinion. The present chapter extends this analysis by showing how the mainstream and polarization patterns form and change over time in response to changes in the intensities of competing messages in a two-sided information flow. The chapter further shows how changes in the relative intensities of opposing messages can produce not only the patterns of attitude change observed in Chapters 7 and 8, but more complicated ones as well.

More generally, then, this chapter seeks to show that public opinion can be understood as a response to the relative intensity and stability of opposing flows...
of liberal and conservative communications. (Again, I stress that use of these ideological labels is meant to convey only the directional thrust of the message.) Whether public opinion is momentarily stable in the mainstream or polarization pattern, or undergoing attitude change, depends on whether the opposing communication flows are one-sided or evenly balanced, and whether they are stable or changing over time.

Unfortunately, there are few issues for which the relative intensity of opposing messages changes clearly and crisply over a short period of time, and only one case of which I am aware in which the resulting changes in mass attitudes have been adequately captured by a series of high-quality surveys. This case, however, is an important and intrinsically interesting one: popular support for and opposition to American involvement in the Vietnam War. This case will provide most of the illustrative material for the argument of this chapter.

To accomplish the goals of this chapter, it will be necessary to engage in some statistical modeling and a fairly extensive discussion of the data employed. To make it easier to see where the technical work is going, I have included a simple illustration of the effects of two-sided information flows at the beginning of the chapter. Then, in the middle section of the chapter, I develop a statistical model that is capable of capturing attitude change in response to changes in a two-sided information flow. The final section describes the measures used in testing the model and the results of the modeling effort.

**EBB AND FLOW OF SUPPORT FOR THE VIETNAM WAR**

The case of the Vietnam War presents an unusually fertile opportunity for examining the dynamics of public opinion. Among its attractive features are the following:

- Rapid change in elite positions on the issue. Liberal opinion leaders overwhelmingly supported the war in 1964, but mainly opposed it in 1970. Conservative elites, by contrast, continued to support the war throughout the period of American involvement.
- Changes in the intensity of the dominant message. President Johnson made far more strenuous efforts to promote public support for the war after the increased commitment of U.S. ground troops in 1965 than he had a year earlier, when he was in the midst of an election campaign.
- Changes in the intensity of the countervailing message. The antiwar message was virtually nonexistent in 1964 and was still hardly more than a whisper in 1966. By 1970, however, it was probably as intense, and perhaps more intense, than the prowar message.

The election studies conducted by the Center for Political Studies (CPS) at the University of Michigan during the Vietnam War provide excellent data on the public's response to this issue. An almost identical question, quoted in Chapter 8, was asked in four different surveys, and each of these surveys carried...
But the prowar story was nonetheless far more intense than was the antiwar story, which averaged about 1.5 cover-related items per magazine per year. A close examination of these early antiwar stories shows, in addition, that they did not portray partisan opposition to the war, as did much of the later coverage; rather, they reported difficulties in the conduct of the war that might have been interpreted as reasons for strengthening the U.S. commitment.

As can also be seen in Figure 9.1a, the prowar message gained considerably in intensity between 1964 and 1966, maintaining this higher level of intensity through about 1968. After 1968 the prowar message declined rapidly, falling almost to 1964 levels of intensity. Meanwhile, the antiwar message gained in intensity each year and appears to have caught and even overtaken the prowar message in intensity by 1970.

A peculiarity of these data is the overall fall-off in news coverage of the war in 1970. Did the volume of war coverage really decline in 1970, even though levels of U.S. troop commitment remained near peak levels, or did war news simply cease to be featured in periodical publications?1 To check the latter possibility, I did a simple count of pages in the New York Times Index devoted to stories about Vietnam. The results, displayed in Figure 9.1b, suggest that the total volume of war coverage remained high in the later years of the war. What seems to have happened, thus, is that war coverage lost its novelty in later years of the conflict, and so tended to drop out of the trendier periodical literature. In another medium, however, the overall volume of coverage remained high.

As a further check on information flow during the war, I examined Hallin's (1984) published analysis of prowar and antiwar statements in the television news. A central finding of his study was that "spokesmen for administration policy were heavily predominant during the early period [prior to spring, 1968], while after Tet there was relative parity between the administration and its critics" (1984: 9). Hallin also reports (personal communication) that the overall volume of war coverage on television increased through about 1966 and remained roughly steady until after 1970.

One can also take the actions of leading political figures as an indicator of trends in political communications on the war. For example, when in 1964 President Johnson sought congressional authorization for his Vietnam policy in the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, it passed 414 to 0 in the House of Representatives and by a margin of 88 to 2 in the Senate. These congressional actions suggest, as did the media analysis for this period, that political communications in the early phase of the Vietnam War predominately favored American involvement.

As U.S. involvement in the war increased in 1965 and 1966, President Johnson devoted more of his public utterances to promoting his war policy. However, real congressional debate over the Vietnam War, including the first hints of opposition to it, also emerged, and this period, most prominently in hearings conducted by Senator William Fulbright in 1966. Beginning in 1967, there were also some attempts in Congress to cut off funding for the war. Yet these initial efforts were soundly defeated, indicating continued strong support for the war by congressional elites.2 So again, the actions of leading political figures are broadly consistent with the trends in media coverage, as depicted in Figure 9.1a.

The years 1969 and 1970 marked the height of heavily covered antiwar protests, but they were also a time in which the Nixon administration sought by its well-publicized "Vietnamization" program to show that U.S. policy was succeeding, and a time in which attempts in Congress to cut off war funding continued to be defeated, though by closer margins than previously.3 Here, then, we find a discrepancy between the two indicators of communications flow. Although the news magazine data suggest that the flow of communications favored the antiwar position by 1970, the actions of political officeholders show that there remained a stream of communications that was, en balance, supportive of American involvement.

Taking all of these indicators together, it appears that both the prowar and the antiwar messages became more intense between 1964 and 1966, with the prowar message initially far more intense but losing this advantage by 1970. The flow of pro- and antiwar communications may have been roughly even by 1970, and probably still quite high in overall volume.

This is a more complicated pattern of change in the flow of political communications than has been examined so far, and one which cannot be fully accommodated in the simple model developed in Chapter 7. To capture its effects, a "two-message model" of opinion change is necessary.

The central idea in a two-message model is that citizens are exposed to two communication flows, one on each side of the issue. These opposing communications may have different effects in different segments of the population, depending on the relative intensity of the messages. For example, in the period between 1964 and 1966, one might expect the antiwar message, which was still very low in intensity even in 1966, to have had its greatest impact on the most politically aware liberals: Their high levels of awareness would ensure reception of the message, and their liberalism would make them sympathetic to it. By contrast, the increase in the prowar message from 1964 to 1966 might be expected to have a relatively larger impact on persons of moderate or low political awareness: The prowar message was, as just shown, already fairly intense in 1964, and so would probably have reached most highly aware persons at that time. Hence the increase in its intensity would mainly affect persons who had not yet gotten the message in 1964, that is, moderately aware or less-aware persons.

---

1 A separate count of Vietnam articles in the Readers Guide to Periodical Literature shows a similar decline across a wider range of media outlets.

2 A 1966 proposal to repeal the Gulf of Tonkin resolution was defeated in a Senate vote by a margin of 92 to 5; a 1967 House amendment barring funds for military operations over North Vietnam was defeated 372 to 18. See Jack McWeeny, The Power of the Pentagon (1972: p. 112).

3 In 1970 the Cooper-Church amendment, barring funds for U.S. military operations in Cambodia, passed the Senate 58 to 37, but was defeated in the House 237 to 153. Later in 1970 the McGovern-Hatfield amendment, setting a deadline for U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, was defeated in the Senate by a vote of 55 to 39; the measure did not come to a vote in the House (ibid.).
Figure 9.2. Patterns of support for the Vietnam War among liberals in 1964 and 1966. Logit estimates for the figure on right are constructed from a model in which awareness and awareness squared were the only independent variables. The awareness scores used in constructing this figure are given in footnote 15. The measure of support for the war is described in Chapter 8. For reasons discussed in connection with Figure 9.6, this analysis is limited to whites. Source: 1964 and 1966 CPS surveys.

These suppositions, as can be seen in Figure 9.2, nicely fit the changing patterns of support for the Vietnam War among liberals between 1964 and 1966. (The measure of liberal or dovish values used in this figure will be described later in the chapter.) Support for the war among those aware of the atmosphere change between 1964 and 1966, presumably because they had finally begun to be heavily exposed to prowar arguments; notwithstanding this, the most aware doves began to turn against the war between 1964 and 1966, presumably because they encountered and accepted an antiwar message that was still inaudible to less attentive doves.

This account of attitude change between 1964 and 1966, though rough and informal, is the clearest illustration I have for the main point of this chapter: Public attitudes on major issues change in response to changes in the relative intensities of competing streams of political communications, as filtered through the reception-acceptance process. As I have indicated, however, this account is preliminary. To make it fully credible, it will be necessary to explain not only attitude change among doves between 1964 and 1966, but attitude change in the whole population between 1964 and 1970. (The CPS item on Vietnam was changed after 1970, which is why my analysis ends at that point.)

A TWO-MESSAGE MODEL OF ATTITUDE CHANGE

The basic claim of the RAS model is that people respond to survey questions on the basis of whatever considerations are present in their minds and immediately accessible in memory. The formation of considerations, for its part, depends on the flow of communications in the political environment. Hence, changes in the relative intensities of the opposing messages determine people’s relative propensities to form liberal and conservative considerations, which in turn determine their survey responses.

In order to test this basic claim, it is necessary to introduce some simplifying assumptions in the RAS model. First, it is not possible to measure reception and acceptance of each of the discrete communications—official speeches, press releases, news stories, and so on—that constituted the real-world prowar and antiwar messages of the Vietnam era. Hence, I will assume that, within each two-year period, all communications concerning the war fell into a fixed but reasonably small number of categories, which I will take to be “messages.” I further assume that all of the messages of a given direction and time interval are equally intense. Thus, within each two-year time period, there will be N prowar messages of uniform intensity, and N antiwar messages of different but uniform intensity. Since real-world communications are too numerous and varied to be actually measurable or, if organized into a manageable number of topics, merely abstract entities anyway, nothing of importance seems lost by this simplification.

The second simplifying assumption is that no consideration remains active in a person’s mind for more than two years unless it is reinforced by reception and acceptance of an identical argument, in which case it is the same as a new consideration. The value of this assumption is that, once it has been made, public opinion in each of the four Vietnam surveys can be modeled as a response to communications in the preceding two years, which eliminates the need to take account of the lagged effects of communication from earlier time periods. Although there is no doubt that communications have effects that can last longer than two years, the four surveys of the Vietnam dataset do not provide sufficient leverage to determine what the lagged effects are. Hence, again, it does not seem that anything has been lost by the simplifying assumption.

The final simplifying assumption is that individuals respond to survey questions on the basis of the first consideration that comes to mind rather than on the basis of whatever considerations are accessible, as allowed in axiom A4. This assumption greatly simplifies the formal structure of the model without, again, giving up anything about which we have information in the present data.

We can now begin development of a model for the diffusion of competing liberal and conservative messages about the Vietnam War. The model is based on a two-step process in which individuals are exposed to political communications that, if received and accepted, become considerations for them. I begin with a model of the reception process, as follows:

\[
\text{Prob(Reception)}_{ik} = 1 - \left[1 + f + \text{Exp(a}_k + u_i \times \text{Awareness} - 1\right]^{-1}
\]

(9.1a)

Equation 9.1a is a standard logistic function, that is, one that varies between a floor of zero and a ceiling of 1.0. The subscript \(i\) indicates individual-level differences. The subscript \(k\) refers to the ideological coloration of the message.

4 See Appendix B to Chapter 10 for a model that permits lagged effects of previous communications.
changed as liberal elites began to oppose the war starting in about 1966, this specification will enable us to test whether ideological distance and awareness became, as expected, more strongly associated with resistance to persuasion after that time.

With the reception function in Equation 9.1a and the acceptance function in Equation 9.2, we have precise statements about how individuals respond to the political communications they encounter, selectively internalizing some of these communications as new considerations. What remains is to state how they transform considerations into survey responses.

The RAS model, as indicated, assumes that individuals sample whatever consideration is "at the top of the head" at the moment of response. Let $R_i$ be defined as a function giving the likelihood that a typical consideration, having been formed, will be accessible for answering survey questions, and let it be assumed that $R_i$ varies directly with political awareness and nothing else, as follows:\footnote{An argument might be made that the $a_i$ coefficient, which captures the strength of relationship between reception and awareness independently of message intensity, should also be subscripted by time or by message. If, for example, a message was carried exclusively through political media in its early phases, but was carried through entertainment and political media in a later phase, it would be appropriate to allow for a stronger relationship between exposure and awareness in the earlier period. Since, however, the Vietnam data are not strong enough to make credible tests of the null hypothesis, I have specified a time-invariant $a_i$ parameter.}

$$
Prob(Recall) = 1 - [1 + \exp(c_0 + c_1*Awareness)]^{-1} = R_i
$$

(9.3)

Note that because this function carries no $k$ subscripts, it applies to each consideration in a person’s mind, so that regardless of when a consideration has been formed or which side of the issue it favors, it is equally likely to be sampled. One can readily imagine more complicated or ideologically biased sampling functions, but the available data provide neither means for testing more complicated formulations nor reason to try them, since the present specification turns out to work quite well.

With the new $R_i$ term, we can write an expression for the probability that a message to which an individual has been exposed will be immediately accessible in memory as a consideration. This is simply the probability that an individual has received the message, times the probability that he has accepted it, times the probability that he has it accessible in memory at the moment of responding to an attitude question, as follows:

$$
Prob(Accessible)_{it} = R_i(Accept_{it})R_i
$$

(9.4)

Since we have already assumed that there are $N$ prowar arguments ($k = P$) and $N$ antiar war arguments ($k = A$), the relative accessibility of prowar considerations is equal to

$$
\sum N R_{Pi}(Accept_{it})R_i = \sum N R_{Pi}(Accept_{it})R_i
$$

(9.5)
This expression can be simplified in two ways. First, the $R_i$ terms appear in both the numerator and denominator, so they cancel and can be omitted. Second, because there are, by assumption, equal numbers of prowar and antivar messages, and because all messages of each type are assumed to be equally intense, the summation signs also become superfluous. This leaves

$$\frac{RE_i(Accept_{p,i})}{RE_i(Accept_{p,i}) + RE_i(Accept_{a,i})} \quad (9.6)$$

as our measure of the relative accessibility of prowar considerations $P$ over antivar considerations $A$ in the mind of individual $i$ at time $t$, where the reception and acceptance functions are given by Equations 9.1a and 9.2. Equation 9.6 is intuitively quite simple: Relative accessibilities depend on the reception-acceptance ratios of the two messages, where these ratios vary by time and by differences among individuals in awareness and ideological distance.

One problem remains: namely, what to do about "No opinion" responses. In the Vietnam case as in others, large numbers of the public reported that they had no opinion. Presumably, people make such responses when they are unable to call to mind any consideration that would give them a reason for supporting one rather than the other side of the issue. If the chance that any particular consideration is accessible in the memory of the $i$th individual is $AC_{ai}$ (from Equation 9.4), then the chance that someone would have none of the $2^N$ possible considerations readily accessible in memory is

$$Prob(\text{No opinion})_i = (1 - AC_{ai})(1 - AC_{ai})(1 - AC_{ai}) \ldots (1 - AC_{ai})$$

Assuming, as I have, an equal number of liberal and conservative messages, this becomes

$$Prob(\text{No opinion})_i = \Pi_i (1 - AC_{ip}) \Pi_i (1 - AC_{ai})$$

$$= \Pi_i (1 - RE_{i,p}Accept_{p,i} R_i) \Pi_i (1 - RE_{i,a}Accept_{a,i} R_i)$$

The probability of having some opinion, then, is

$$Prob(\text{Opinion})_i = 1 - \Pi_i (1 - AC_{ip}) \Pi_i (1 - AC_{ai}) \quad (9.7)$$

Putting this expression for opinionation together with the expression for the relative accessibility of prowar arguments, we obtain the basic statistical model for estimating support for the Vietnam War:

$$Prob_{p,i} = (\text{Probability of recalling any consideration at all}) \times$$

$$\left(\frac{\text{Accessibility of prowar considerations}}{\text{Accessibility of prowar considerations} + \text{Accessibility of antivar considerations}}\right)$$

This equation, in conjunction with appropriately modified expressions for antivar and "No opinion" responses, is my model for fitting the opinion data on Vietnam.

This two-message model is obviously quite different in form from the one-message model developed in Chapter 7, which was intended as a simplification of the basic attitude-change process. However, both models are capable of capturing, in essentially similar fashion, many types of attitude change, as will be shown below. The two-message model is, however, by far the more versatile and powerful, as will also be apparent.

The model developed in this section is not, I might add, the only form that a two-message model could take. In Appendix A to this chapter, I derive an alternative form which, because it omits any reference to considerations, is mathematically simpler.

Before estimating the two-message model on the CPS data series on the Vietnam War, I must describe certain features of the data. Despite their generally high quality, there are some empirical problems in adapting them for use by the two-message model.

**DATA AND RESULTS**

None of the major CPS surveys conducted from 1964 to 1970 were reinterviews with the same respondents. The analysis of mass attitudes across time therefore requires comparisons of particular types of persons across time--comparison, for example, of war support among "highly informed doves" in 1964 with war support among "highly informed doves" in 1966, 1968, and 1970. This, in turn, requires the construction of highly similar measures of awareness and values in all four surveys, so that similar subgroups of people can be located in each survey.

With respect to awareness, this is easy to do. As discussed in the Measures Appendix, each survey contains a set of information items sufficient to build an awareness scale with an alpha reliability of .80 or better. Although most of the information items vary from year to year, there is no reason to believe that they vary in consequential ways. Just as one could rank order individuals in terms of spelling ability with one randomly selected set of twenty words about as well as with another randomly selected set of twenty words, so the different information tests used in the different CPS surveys should all serve roughly equally well.

Building comparable measures of political values is more difficult. One possible measure of values is a person's "ideological" position on the left-right continuum, which can be measured in the CPS surveys as the difference in
"feeling thermometer" scores for liberals and conservatives. This measure,
have, as assumed, captured a time-invariant relationship between the auxiliary
variables and hawk–dove values, they should predict how exactly the auxiliary
variables were related to hawk–dove values in the Vietnam era. So we use these
coefficients as weights on the auxiliary variables to combine them into a new
instrumental variable." The new variable, a weighted combination of the in-
formation on numerous auxiliary variables, should predict who was likely to
have been a hawk or a dove in the 1960s.

A limitation of this approach, as with any use of instrumental variables, is
that the instrument is only as good as the auxiliary variables that have been used
to construct it, which, in the present case, is not very good, since the r-
square on the first stage regression is only 0.14. Despite this, the measure turns
out to perform extremely well, as will be shown below. (See Appendix B of this
chapter for further details and discussion of the measure; see also footnote 14.)

One final measurement issue needs to be addressed. Although, as I indicated,
the Michigan surveys asked essentially the same Vietnam question over four
surveys, there is one noteworthy discontinuity. In 1964 and 1966 all respondents
were asked whether they had been "paying attention to what is going on in Viet-

nam," and only those who responded affirmatively were subsequently asked
whether they supported or opposed American involvement. In 1964, some 20
percent of the respondents failed this minimal test of interest and were not asked
whether they supported or opposed the war; in 1966 persons failing to pass the
initial interest screen fell to 7 percent. Then, in 1968 and 1970, the interest
screen was dropped, so that only those volunteering a "No opinion" response
are counted in that category.

This discontinuity makes it difficult to offer confident estimates of the
changes in "No-opinion" rates between 1966 and 1968. Yet the trajectory of
decline from 1964 to 1966 in no-attention responses (from 20 percent to 7 per-
cent) suggests that the number of such respondents still having no interest in
1968 was probably small. And, of course, respondents could still volunteer a
"No-opinion" response to the Vietnam item itself. Some 7 percent did in 1968,
which was down from 9 percent in 1966 and 13 percent in 1964. The fact that
volunteered rates of "No opinion" continued to fall from 1966 to 1968 despite
removal of the interest filter, as well as other published data (Pierce, Beaity, and
Hagner, 1982: p. 142), make it clear that "No opinion" rates did actually con-
tinue to decline between 1966 and 1968. But the CPS data probably overestimate
the amount by which they did so.

This problem can be accommodated by adding a time subscript to the "floor
parameter" in the reception function, as follows:

\[
\text{Prob}(RE_{ht}) = 1 - \left[1 + f_t + \exp(o_{it} + a_t \cdot \text{Awareness}_t)\right]^{-1}
\]  
(9.1b)

where \(f_t\) can take different values in 1964–6 and 1968–70. The subscripted \(f\)-
parameter permits different floor levels of opinionation, depending on the
presence or absence of a "No-opinion" filter.
Estimation of the model

The model makes multinomial estimates of response probabilities for three categories: support for the war, opposition to it, and no opinion. These estimates are made across four datasets having 5,002 respondents. Initial estimation of the model indicated that patterns of opinion change were different among Anglo whites than other groups. A separate analysis was therefore undertaken for blacks and is reported below; however, Hispanic and Asian-American respondents have been omitted because there are too few cases for separate analysis.

My first estimates of the model produced plausible values for all coefficients, but a graphical analysis showed that the estimated coefficients “underfit” the raw data, in the sense that trends which were clearly apparent in the raw data, as in Figure 9.2, were not adequately represented. The underfitting was not dramatic, but it was quite noticeable. To remedy the problem, I added a term for awareness times values in the acceptance function, and this enabled the model to do a better job of fitting the raw data, though underfitting remains a problem.

Maximum likelihood coefficient estimates of Equation 9.8 for whites are shown in the first column of Table 9.1. The coefficients in the table are described in terms of the substantive variable to which they refer and the subfunction in which they occur. The standard errors for all coefficients, which are also shown, should be regarded as approximate.

The most notable aspect of these coefficient estimates is their lack of statistical precision, which is to say, the very high standard errors that are associated with them. There are two fairly obvious reasons for this problem. The first is that the data have given the model no indication of the actual intensities of the communication flows that are supposedly shaping opinion — except that they differ by year and by message — or the number of discrete messages citizens were exposed to. This creates severe multicollinearity: There might have been few messages of high intensity, or many messages of low intensity, and the model has no way of telling. Second, political awareness has three separate roles to play — namely, mediating memory search, reception, and resistance. On top of this, awareness appears in several interaction terms in the acceptance function. The effect, once again, is severe multicollinearity.

In an effort to reduce the multicollinearity, I introduced some plausible constraints in the model. Before presenting results from the constrained model, however, it is instructive to examine the unconstrained coefficients.

9 As explained in the last chapter, the war support option combines two separate response options — keeping U.S. troops in Vietnam while trying to end the fighting, and taking a stronger stand even if it means invading North Vietnam. The first represents the consistent position of the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations; the latter was the preferred strategy of some right-wing critics of the administration. Hawks and doves differed in expected ways in their choices between the two prowar options, and it would be desirable to build a “three-message model” capable of capturing this variation.

10 I should add that none of the substantive conclusions of this chapter would have to be changed if the Awareness × Values terms were omitted; their inclusion serves only to enhance the visual clarity of the simulations, as in Figure 9.4.

<p>| Table 9.1. Coefficients for diffusion of prowar and antiwar messages on Vietnam War |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Unconstrained model</th>
<th>Constrained model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reception function (Equation 9.1b)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eight dummy intercepts ((a_{ik}))</td>
<td>See Figure 9.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message intercept(^a)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–5.68 (1.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message slope</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.71 (0.64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness (^b)</td>
<td>0.51 (0.32)</td>
<td>0.50 (0.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(standardized)</td>
<td>(0.32)</td>
<td>(0.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Floor 64–66 ((f))</td>
<td>0.008 (0.11)</td>
<td>0.01 (0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.11)</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Floor 68–70 ((f))</td>
<td>0.04 (0.55)</td>
<td>0.06 (0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.55)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance function (Equation 9.2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative message intercept ((b_{ik}))</td>
<td>1.43 (2.36)</td>
<td>2.31 (1.48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal message intercept</td>
<td>–1.06 (3.83)</td>
<td>–1.23 (0.43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3.83)</td>
<td>(0.43)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>–0.08 (1.09)</td>
<td>0.06 (0.50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1.09)</td>
<td>(0.50)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness × time (^b)</td>
<td>–0.27 (0.78)</td>
<td>–0.43 (0.51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Time = 0 in 1964, 1 afterward)</td>
<td>(0.78)</td>
<td>(0.51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawk–dove (^b)</td>
<td>0.11 (0.26)</td>
<td>0.19 (0.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(standardized)</td>
<td>(0.26)</td>
<td>(0.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawk–dove × awareness (^b)</td>
<td>0.01 (0.27)</td>
<td>–0.07 (0.32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.27)</td>
<td>(0.32)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>0.29 (2.55)</td>
<td>0.47 (0.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2.55)</td>
<td>(0.41)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawk–dove × time (^b)</td>
<td>0.19 (0.33)</td>
<td>0.14 (0.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.33)</td>
<td>(0.30)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawk–dove × awareness × time (^b)</td>
<td>0.09 (0.27)</td>
<td>0.22 (0.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.27)</td>
<td>(0.35)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>–0.18 (0.21)</td>
<td>–0.05 (0.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 – male)</td>
<td>(0.21)</td>
<td>(0.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recall function (Equation 9.3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept ((c_i))</td>
<td>3.19 (2.48)</td>
<td>3.47 (2.36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2.48)</td>
<td>(2.36)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness ((c_f))</td>
<td>1.66 (94)</td>
<td>1.75 (94)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Note: Dependent variable is a multinomial item on Vietnam policy support for the war, opposition to it, and no opinion. The model is Equation 9.8, with subfunctions specified by Equations 9.1b, 9.2, and 9.3. Estimation is by maximum likelihood. N of cases is 5002.

In the unconstrained model, changes in message intensity over time are captured by eight dummy intercepts in the reception function, one for the liberal and conservative message in each of the four years, as plotted in Figure 9.3. In the constrained model, the message intercept and slope operate on the eight logged story counts shown in Figure 9.1 to produce eight estimates of message intensity.

Coefficient is negative in acceptance function for conservative message (indicating lower acceptance among liberals) and positive in acceptance function for liberal message.


Note first that, in the acceptance function, the effects of both ideology and awareness appear to increase markedly from the period in which there was a mainstream elite consensus (1964) to the period in which the war provoked elite disagreement (1966 through 1970). The direct effect of values increased by a factor of 1.7, the direct effect of awareness increased by a factor of 3.4, and the awareness × values interaction increased by a factor of 11.11

These results support a key point in my argument, namely that the effects of values and awareness on political attitudes are not automatic but depend on elite cues for activation.

As explained in the previous section, the model uses changes in the intercept of the reception function, in the form of the \( a_{int} \) coefficients, to estimate the intensities of pro- and antiwar communications that would have been necessary to produce the observed patterns of opinion on the war. The values of these coefficients are shown in Figure 9.3 (rather than in Table 9.1). Their absolute values have little meaning, but changes over time indicate changes in the relative intensities of the two messages and therefore do have meaning. Thus, the model estimates that the prowar message increased in intensity from 1964 to 1966, fell back moderately in 1968, and declined once again in 1970. Meanwhile, the model estimates that the antiwar message, though initially very weak, steadily gained in intensity until 1970, when it finally became more intense than the prowar message.

11 In my earlier analysis of opinion on the Vietnam War (Zaller, 1991), awareness had positively signed effects in the acceptance function. This difference is due to a change in the form of the acceptance function, as explained in footnote 14 of Chapter 7.
elitist divisions over the war activated the public’s predispositions toward support or opposition.

Of the substantively interesting variables, only male gender is insignificant in the constrained model. This is surprising, since a gender effect is visibly present in the raw data (see Zaller, 1991). I guessed that the problem might be that gender is an important contributor to the hawk–dove instrument and so is, in a sense, being entered into the acceptance function twice. I therefore substituted a more direct measure of ideology — the difference in each respondent’s ratings of liberals and conservatives on 100-point feeling thermometers, as described above — into the acceptance function and reestimated the model. In this model, gender was statistically significant on an individual coefficient F-test ($F(2,9987), 13.68, p < .01$).  

Patterns of support for and opposition to the war

More important than the fit of the model to the data is the substantive story implied by the data and the model. The story emerges readily from a graphical analysis, as shown in Figure 9.4.  

Let us examine first the attitudes of doves. Figure 9.4 shows that in 1964 political awareness had a roughly linear relationship with support for the war. This result exemplifies the mainstream or “follower” model of opinion formation, as discussed in Chapter 6.

By 1966, however, the Johnson administration was attempting to counter an incipient antirwar movement through “peace offensives,” condemnations of “communist aggression,” and other public ploys. The effects of the louder
prowar message register mainly among respondents in the middle to lower ranges of the information spectrum; these are people who previously had been only lightly exposed to the prowar message and were now readily converted to supporting it. Meanwhile, the antiwar message, though barely audible to most of the public, had begun to reach and convert the most politically informed doves, who were the one segment of the public to become less supportive of the war between 1964 and 1966.

The top middle panel of Figure 9.4 shows that, as late as 1968, a small prowar trend is still evident among the least informed doves (though this effect is statistically uncertain) who were still just getting the prowar message, but that the small prowar trend at the low end of the awareness scale is offset by a much larger antiwar movement in the middle and upper ranges of the awareness scale. Thus the balance of pro- and antiwar messages that had mainly favored the war in 1966 was working against it in 1968. Finally, as the top right panel of Figure 9.4 shows, all segments of the dove subgroup were turning against the war by 1970.

Note that the biggest antiwar shift in liberal opinion occurred after Richard Nixon took over the presidency in 1969. With the war effort being led by a Republican rather than a Democrat, many doves found it easier to oppose the war, an observation first made in Mueller's (1973) account of changing patterns of support for the war. Yet it is also notable that the two-message model quite nicely pegs up the acceleration in liberal antiwar opinion after 1969 without including a special term for change in presidential leadership; the only source of opinion change on Vietnam in this period is change in the pattern of pro- and antiwar information in the media, as shown in Figure 9.1a.

Changing patterns of war support among hawks generally parallel those among doves, with the conspicuous exception that war support among the most aware hawks never really declines. Between 1964 and 1966, support for the war grows in all awareness groups, including those scoring at the very top of the awareness scale. In 1968 gains in support for the war among the less informed roughly balance small losses among the most informed. And in 1970, despite the growing intensity of the antiwar message, support for the war among hawks declines only slightly—mainly among moderately aware hawks. Thus, throughout the war, political awareness remains positively associated with what is, among hawks, a strong partisan norm.

It is interesting to compare the effects of political awareness on hawks and doves. First of all, the least informed within each camp behave similarly. Owing to their habitual inattentiveness to politics, they are late to support the war and also late to respond to antiwar information. Moderately aware hawks and doves also behave fairly similarly: They fail to support the war in its initial stage because they have not been sufficiently propagandized; as the prowar message heats up, they become more supportive of the war, but then just as quickly begin to abandon the war when the antiwar message becomes loud enough to reach them. The most politically aware ideologues, meanwhile, behave very differently. Highly aware doves begin turning against the war as early as 1966; highly aware hawks, by contrast, largely hold their ground, so that they are almost as likely to support the war in 1970 as they were at the start of the conflict. The explanation, of course, is that hawks were sustained by a steady flow of ideologically congenial prowar messages and were, at the same time, highly resistant to the ideologically inconsistent antiwar message.

Although my analysis has focused on differing rates of support for the Vietnam War, the model also accounts for trends in opposition to the war and in “No opinion” rates. The latter are rather interesting, as depicted in Figure 9.5. There is, as would be expected, a strong relationship between “No opinion” rates and political awareness. But the relationship is much steeper early in the war, when most politically unaware persons had no opinion on the war, than it was in later years, when most citizens had opinions. The model is able to accommodate these changing “No opinion” rates because the opinionation function carries information (via Equation 9.4) about the intensity of communications on the war, and more intense messages are, of course, associated with lower rates of the “No opinion” response.

Although it is not shown in Figure 9.5, the model predicts an increase in “No opinion” rates between 1968 and 1970. This projected increase is small, about 2 percentage points in the lowest awareness group and even smaller in other groups, and so does not show up in the raw data. However, Pierce, Beatty, and Hagner (1982: p. 142) report that, across several surveys, “No opinion” rates did begin to creep upward in 1971, a reflection perhaps of a decline in the intensity of communications on the war.

16 More specifically, the $RE_{ij}$ terms in Equation (9.4) carry the $a_{ij}$ coefficients.
Figure 9.6. Trends in black support for the Vietnam War, 1964–1970. Trend lines have been derived from logistic regressions. The awareness measure in the figure runs ± 1.75 SD. Source: 1964, 1966, 1968, and 1970 CPS surveys.

AFRO-AMERICANS' SUPPORT FOR THE WAR

The small number of Afro-Americans available for analysis in the CPS datasets (despite black oversamples in some years) makes it difficult to make a confident assessment of black trends in support for the war. Nonetheless, the available data reveal some highly suggestive patterns, as shown in Figure 9.6. (The data in this figure have been constructed from simple polynomial regression in order to smooth out lumpiness arising from sampling error.)

The data in the left panel of Figure 9.6 show patterns of war support among blacks in 1964 and 1966. These patterns generally resemble those of white conservatives, rather than white liberals, in Figure 9.4; there is, in other words, a generally positive relationship between awareness and support for the war, with an increase in support between 1964 and 1966 that registers mainly among less-aware and moderately aware persons. The jump in war support presumably reflects the increase in the intensity of prowar communications. Contrary to some analyses, these data offer no indication that blacks were initially reluctant to support the Vietnam War.

After 1966, however, black attitudes toward the war begin to resemble those of white liberals, as can be seen from a comparison of the right-hand side of Figure 9.6 with trends among liberals in Figure 9.4. That is, support for the war declined significantly, especially among highly and moderately informed blacks, as a result of the gradual diffusion of the antiwar message.

Nothing in these opinion data can, by itself, explain why black attitudes toward the war should resemble those of white conservatives until 1966 and those

of white liberals after that time. There seems, nonetheless, to be an obvious explanation: The Vietnam War was led by President Lyndon Johnson, who in 1964 and 1965 won congressional approval for two historic civil rights bills and who launched the ambitious War on Poverty program. In light of this, members of the black public were likely to attach greater credibility to Johnson's statements on the war than were other types of persons. By 1968, however, Johnson's civil rights achievements were well behind him and many members of the black civil rights leadership group, including the recently assassinated Martin Luther King, Jr., had come out against the war. In this situation, blacks became more susceptible to the increasingly intense antiwar message.

Thus, blacks appear to have been as responsive as whites to the flow of pro- and antiwar information on Vietnam, but blacks evaluated this information in light of somewhat different leadership cues.

IMPLICATIONS

The results of this chapter have advanced our understanding of the dynamics of opinion change in several respects. First, they provide the first clear evidence of countervalent resistance, most strikingly in the period 1964 to 1966. They show that highly aware doves were able to resist the dominant prowar message of this period in part because they were exposed to the countervalent antiwar message. This message, though less intense than the prowar message in the early stage of the war, not only neutralized the prowar message, but actually induced some of the most aware doves to buck the national trend by becoming less supportive of the war.

The reason that the effects of countervalent communications are so clear in the case of Vietnam is that the countervalent message was becoming more intense at a time when the dominant message was also becoming more intense, so that each message could produce converts in a different part of the public. This pattern of information flows is probably unusual (though see Figure 10.5). But it is likely that there are many other cases in which countervalent communications, though not quite strong enough to produce movements against a predominant national trend, are nonetheless important in inducing resistance to such a trend. We shall see further clear evidence of the effects of countervalent communications in the next chapter.

Second, these results enable us to see that attitude change in response to a two-sided message can take different forms at different points in time, depending on the relative intensities of the opposing messages and the prior distribution of opinion. We see also that some of these patterns do not match those developed in the typology proposed in Chapter 8, a typology that was constructed

17 There is a significant tendency for blacks to be less supportive of the war in both years, but it disappears once a control for political awareness has been imposed. A close inspection of the data further suggests that highly aware blacks were more supportive of the war than highly aware white conservatives (or any other group) in both 1964 and 1966; at the same time, however, less informed blacks were less supportive of the war than less informed white conservatives (or any other group) in each year. These apparent racial differences, however, are unreliable because of very small numbers of cases at the extremities of high and low information.

18 Johnson's approval ratings fell more rapidly among blacks than among whites in the period from 1966 to mid-1968, but then rebounded at the time of the election. (See Dawson, Brown, and Cohen, n.d.)
Figure 9.7. Changes in support for the Vietnam War, 1968–1970. Figure shows percentage of persons supporting the war in 1968 who no longer supported it in 1970. These estimates are derived from the support scores shown in Figure 9.4. Source: 1968 and 1970 CPS surveys.

under the assumption that opinion change is a response to a one-sided information flow.

What, then, do we make of the typology in Chapter 8? Although I cannot say precisely, my simulations of attitude change with Equation 9.8, along with the empirical results reported in Chapter 8, suggest that the typology is, despite its focus on one-sided information flows, a good approximation to a wider variety of cases. The typology appears to be an especially good approximation to the patterns of change that may be expected when one of the opposing messages remains equally intense or loses intensity over time, while the other message gains in intensity. This pattern of changes in a two-sided information flow is perhaps the most common form of stimulus to mass attitude change; in fact, all cases of mass attitude change of which I am aware, except the 1964 to 1966 period of the Vietnam War, appear to have been produced by this type of stimulus. For example, late in the Vietnam War, when the provos message was roughly stable or losing intensity and the antiwar message was gaining in intensity (see Figure 9.3), the typology provides an approximation of the patterns of attitude change that actually occurred, as can be seen in Figure 9.7.

Nonetheless, it remains the case that the patterns depicted in the typology in Chapter 8 strictly hold only under conditions of a one-sided communication flow. These conditions would seem most likely to hold when the period between attitude measurements is short, and when the gain in the relative intensity of one of the messages is large.

Third, the results presented in this chapter, along with the discussion of age effects on the Vietnam issue, constitute an unusually detailed account of how mass belief systems form and change over time in response to a complex stimulus. The leading theoretical account of this general phenomenon has long been Converse's "The nature of belief systems in mass publics" (1964). His argument, it will be recalled, was that certain "creative elites" manufacture wide-ranging belief systems—which is to say, clusters of attitudes that are widely perceived as "going together." These belief systems then diffuse imperfectly through the public, such that only the most aware members of the public manage to fully absorb them.

The argument of this chapter has filled in important details of this general argument and, in so doing, has somewhat altered it. It has documented, first of all, how a new element—an antiwar posture on Vietnam—became gradually incorporated into the liberal belief package, where liberalism itself is operationally measured as general tendencies toward hawkishness or dovishness. (The same patterns of attitude change arise more sharply if a direct measure of ideology—scores for liberals and conservatives on 100-point feeling thermometers—are substituted for the hawk–dove instrument that I used.) The story of this incorporation is largely in the spirit of Converse's analysis: The most politically attuned liberals were the first to adopt the new belief element, while highly aware conservatives tended, in general, to resist it.

There are, however, some unexpected turns. In Converse's theory, ideology operates as a "constraint" on the organization of one's attitudes. Thus, if one is a liberal, one is expected to embrace all of the elements of the liberal belief package. That argument does not, however, readily apply to the highly aware, older liberals who continued to resist the antiwar element of the liberal belief package as late as 1970. As they presumably saw it, the constraints of liberal ideology cut the other way—toward support of the Vietnam War as another case of post–World War II liberal internationalism. Such lags in adopting policies to which individuals are presumably predisposed by their general philosophy represent an interesting and heretofore un glimpsed aspect of the notion of ideological constraint in a dynamic setting.

Another unexpected turn is the back-and-forth movement of moderately aware and less aware liberals. The liberals who moved in a prowar direction between 1964 and 1966 may have thought, if they stopped to reflect on it, that they were moving in a liberal direction. After all, internationalism had been a core element of the liberal belief package for some thirty years, and the principal advocate of the prowar policy was the liberal Democratic president, Lyndon Johnson. Yet, if, as seems most reasonable, ideology is defined by the preferences of its avant garde elites, this is another case in which persons were "constrained" by what they took to be liberalism to adopt a policy attitude that was, for its time, rapidly becoming a litmus test of conservative values.

The analysis of changing attitudes on the Vietnam War thus affords a rare opportunity—rare because the direction of elite cues on most issues is stable from year to year—to observe the evolution of mass ideologies. Although this

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19 For other treatments of the evolution of mass belief systems, see Miller and Levitt, 1976; Carmines and Stimson, 1989; and Hurwitz and Peffley, in press.
case has involved foreign policy attitudes, it is likely that ideological cues on other issues sometimes undergo similar changes in 'what goes with what,' and that when they do, they produce similar changes in the pattern of mass attitudes.

There are, it should be added, no contradictions between my analysis of the Vietnam case and the general theory outlined by Converse. Vietnam has simply provided examples of how, in a dynamic situation, various types of lags may lead to unexpected forms of ideological constraint.

Finally, and most importantly, the results of this chapter provide credible evidence for a very strong claim: that public attitudes toward major issues are a response to the relative intensity of competing political communications on those issues. When elites unite on a mainstream issue, the public's response is relatively nonideological, with the most aware members of the public reflecting the elite consensus most strongly. When elites come to disagree along partisan or ideological lines, the public's response will become ideological as well, with the most politically aware members of the public responding most ideologically.

The degree of mass ideological polarization on an issue reflects the relative intensity of the opposing information flows. Thus, when, in the case of the Vietnam War in 1966, the conservative message was much more intense than the liberal, the degree of polarization was both modest and skewed in the direction of the conservative position; as the opposing information flows became more nearly balanced, overall support for the conservative position fell and ideological polarization became more intense. These points are highlighted in Figure 9.8, which is a reorganization of data presented earlier in Figure 9.4.26 (Polarization is sharper if the ideology thermometers rather than an instrument are used to measure predispositions; see Zaller, 1991, figure 8.

Although the two-message model used in this chapter has made "considerations," defined as discrete reasons for favoring or opposing an idea, its primitive unit of analysis, no measurements of public opinion on Vietnam were made at the level of considerations. As a result, I have been unable to provide direct evidence that the dynamics of the model hold at the intrapsychic level at which people either internalize or fail to internalize particular messages they encounter. The next chapter fills out this part of the argument by showing how the relative intensity of opposing communication flows determines the formation of new considerations, which in turn determines the summary preference statements people make.

APPENDIX A: AN ALTERNATIVE FORM OF TWO-MESSAGE MODEL

In this appendix, I derive an alternative form of two-message model. The alternative omits any reference to considerations, but is otherwise similar to the model developed in the text.

Let us assume a political world in which, within every time period t and with respect to every political issue, citizens are presented with two information flows, or "messages," one tending to push mass opinion in a liberal direction and the other in a conservative direction. The two messages represent the sum of all directionally valenced communications relating to a given issue in the period.

The following three-axiom model shows how, in such a world, temporal variations in the intensities of the liberal and conservative messages can explain both the cross-sectional distribution of mass opinion at any one time and changes in opinion over time.

1. RECEIPTION AXIOM. An individual's probabilities of receiving the liberal and conservative messages within any given time period t are independent, increasing functions of general level of political awareness.

The mathematical form of this axiom is Equation 9.1b.

2. ACCEPTANCE AXIOM. The probability that an individual will resist -- that is, refuse to accept -- a message, given reception of it, increases with (1) distance of the values of the individual and the value coloration of the message, and (2) the likelihood that individuals will be aware of the elite-supplied "contextual information" that gives messages their colorations.

The form of this axiom is given by Equation 9.2.

Before stating the third axiom, I define "supporting messages" as those consistent with an existing opinion and "opposing messages" as those that are inconsistent. The final axiom can now be stated:

3. CHANGE AXIOM. Two types of opinion change, conversion and decay, may occur:
   A. When a person accepts an opposing message (having received it) and does not accept a supporting message (whether receiving it or not), the person converts to the opposing view.
is a proportion raised to an infinite power, goes to zero. This leaves
\[ \text{Lib}_{t+1} = \frac{1 - \frac{1}{X}}{X} \]
\[ = \frac{P_{-c}}{P_{-c} + P_{-l}} + d - d\left(P_{-c} + P_{-l}\right) \]  (9.13)
Thus, opinion at any point in time represents an equilibrium outcome that is
independent of starting values. This equilibrium depends, at the aggregate level,
on the intensities of the competing information flows, and, at the individual
level, on people’s attention to politics and their values. Opinion change in
response to persuasive information, a central topic of my analysis, can be captured
as a difference over time between equilibrium points, where changing equilibria
depend on change in the competing information flows.

This model has been used (Zaller, 1991) to estimate the effect of ideology and
awareness on support for the Vietnam War, producing results that are highly
similar to those reported in this chapter. The main difference is that this model
does less well in estimating the intensities of the antwar and prowar messages
to which the public was exposed, in the sense that its estimates correspond less
well with the story counts shown in Figure 9.1. See footnote 12.

APPENDIX B: MEASUREMENT OF HAWK–DOVE ATTITUDES

Franklin’s instrumental variables technique provides “a method of estimating
relationships between variables not measured in the same dataset” (1989:
p. 23). The method is as follows: One has a measure of variable \( X \) in dataset A
but not dataset B; however the dependent variable of interest, variable \( Y \), is in
dataset B. One then locates a set of auxiliary variables carried in both datasets.
The \( X \) variable is regressed on these auxiliary variables in dataset A, an instru-
ment for \( X \) is built from the resulting coefficient estimates, and this instrument
is used in dataset B as an independent predictor of variable \( Y \). In the present
case, the \( X \) variable is a measure of hawk–dove attitudes, as measured in the
1988 National Election Study; the \( Y \) variable is opinion toward the Vietnam
War, as measured in the CPS surveys of 1964 to 1970. Provided appropriate as-
sumptions are met, Franklin’s technique makes it possible to build an instru-
mental measure of hawk–dove attitudes in the CPS datasets from information
contained in the 1988 NES.

The most important of these assumptions are that both datasets be samples of
the same population, and that relationships between the auxiliary variables and
the \( X \) variable be the same in both datasets. The latter assumption is obviously
the more worrisome, since the datasets were created eighteen to twenty-four
years apart. Nonetheless, it is not implausible to believe that the types of persons
most likely to be doves in 1988, such as females, atheists, and civil rights liberals,
were likely to be doves in the 1960s as well, provided they were given
appropriate leadership cues. And, in fact, all of these variables are correlated.
Table 9.2. First stage regression estimates for hawk-dove instrument

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>T-ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agnostic or atheist</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>4.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>2.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundamentalist&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>2.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jehovah’s Witness</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jew</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>2.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacifistic religion&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>1.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church attendance&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>3.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too slow on civil rights (V845)&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>6.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too fast on civil rights</td>
<td>-0.38</td>
<td>6.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Border state</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern state</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>1.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union member</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>1.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1441</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted r²</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Dependent variable consists of five items, combined by principal components analysis into a scale: Strong military or bargain for peace (V966); importance of strong military (V967); United States stay most powerful (V972); Communist takes control of Europe (V973); United States must stop communism (V974). High scores indicate dovish responses.

<sup>a</sup> Codes 130 to 149, and 152 on V527.
<sup>b</sup> Codes 133, 155, and 156 on V527.
<sup>c</sup> V530, range 1–4.
<sup>d</sup> It was necessary to substitute Aid to Minorities, appropriately recoded, in construction of the Form II instrument of the 1970 CPS study.

**Source:** 1988 NES Survey.

with opinions toward the Vietnam War in the expected directions. Hence, despite some concern, it is reasonable to assume that the conditions necessary to apply the Franklin technique have been met.

Two variables require comment, however. First, age is associated with greater hawkishness in 1988, as measured by general hawk-dove items of the type shown in the text, but less support for the Vietnam War in the 1960s. This does not, however, appear to represent change over time, since older persons, though presumably still tending to be hawkish in 1991, were also less likely to support U.S. military involvement in the Persian Gulf crisis. Second, education is associated with less hawkishness in 1988 but greater support for the Vietnam War, especially in the early phase of the war. This reversal is best explained by Mueller’s (1973) observation that better educated persons, though not dispositionally hawkish, are more susceptible to elite opinion leadership, since they are more heavily exposed to what elites are saying. And again, this does not seem to represent a change in the last twenty years, since education was positively associated with support for mainstream policy in the nation’s most recent war even though it was negatively associated with hawkishness, as measured by the NES in 1988. But even though no sign changes appear to have occurred over time, the “wrong-way” correlations of age and education with hawkishness indicate that they should not be used in building an instrumental measure that is intended to measure predispositions to support the Vietnam War.

The OLS coefficients used in building the hawk-dove instrument, along with information concerning the auxiliary variables, are shown in Table 9.2.

Epilogue: The question of elite domination of public opinion

The voice of the people is but an echo. The output of an echo chamber bears an inevitable and invariable relation to the input. As candidates and parties clamor for attention and vie for popular support, the people's verdict can be no more than a selective reflection from the alternatives and outlooks presented to them (p. 2).

-V. O. Key, Jr., The Responsible Electorate

In the 1930s and 1940s, many observers feared that the rise of the modern mass media would bring a new era of totalitarian domination. Mass circulation newspapers, the newly invented radio, and motion pictures seemed ideal tools for playing upon the fears of the new mass societies, and the great though temporary success of Hitler in Germany, Mussolini in Italy, and Stalin in the Soviet Union seemed to confirm everyone's worst fears.

George Orwell's famous novel 1984 is perhaps the best-known expression of this foreboding. If the potential of the mass media, but many social scientists shared Orwell's apprehension. As a result, attempts to measure the effects of the mass media on public opinion were a staple of early opinion research. This early research turned out to be reassuring, however. Compared to what many feared the media might be able to accomplish, surveys found media effects to be relatively small (Klapper, 1960). The media most often served to reinforce and activate existing opinion rather than to create it, and much of the impact the media did have was mediated by community leaders in a kind of "two-step flow" (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet, 1944; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee, 1944).

If media effects were, as almost all research indicated, "minimal," then the danger from political elites who might exploit the media to manipulate mass opinion must be minimal as well - or so it seemed to the majority of mainstream communication researchers who, notwithstanding the importunings of a handful of identifiably leftist academics (for example, Miliband, 1969), were content to ignore the possibility of elite domination of mass opinion by means of the mass media.

Recently, however, the standard belief in "minimal" effects has come under severe attack. Using widely different methodologies but converging on the same conclusion, several research groups have found evidence of substantial media effects (Patterson and McClure, 1974; Patterson, 1980; Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder, 1982; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Bartels, 1988; Fan, 1988; Brody, 1991; Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey, 1987; Page and Shapiro, in press). No single news story or broadcast may have great effect, but the cumulative effect of many stories over a period of months or years may nonetheless be large (Iyengar, 1991). Thus, although the old model of the media as a "hypodermic needle" that could inject ideas into the body politic on command has not been revived, mainstream communication research has now developed a healthy respect for what the media, and the politicians who use it, can accomplish.

If the theory of minimal media effects has lost its academic warrant, then so has complaisance over the potential for elite manipulation of mass opinion through use of the media. In this concluding section, I therefore turn to this issue. My discussion will be heavily structured by the categories of my earlier empirical analyses.

DEFINING ELITE DOMINATION

The argument of this book is, on first inspection, scarcely encouraging with respect to domination of mass opinion by elites. Many citizens, as was argued, pay too little attention to public affairs to be able to respond critically to the political communications they encounter; rather, they are blown about by whatever current of information manages to develop the greatest intensity. The minority of citizens who are highly attentive to public affairs are scarcely more critical: They respond to new issues mainly on the basis of the partisanship and ideology of the elite sources of the messages.

If many citizens are largely uncritical in their response to political communications as carried in the mass media, and if most of the rest respond mechanically on the basis of partisan cues, how can one deny the existence of a substantial degree of elite domination of public opinion?

It all depends on how one defines elite domination. If one takes it to mean any situation in which the public changes its opinion in the direction of the "information" and leadership cues supplied by it to elites, indeed, there is not much to argue about. Not only the present study, but several others provide abundant evidence of this sort of elite domination (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey, 1987; Fan, 1988).

Yet the matter cannot be decided so easily. Of course the public responds to elite-supplied information and leadership cues. How could it be otherwise in a world in which events are ambiguous and in which the public must regularly have opinions about matters that are, to use Lippmann's phrase again, "out of reach, out of sight, out of mind" (1922, 1946: p. 21)?

Page and Shapiro (in press), recognizing an unavoidable dependency of public opinion on elite discourse, frame the problem in terms of the "quality of information and interpretation [that] is conveyed to the public." They continue,
To the extent that the public receives useful interpretations and correct and helpful information — information and interpretations that help it arrive at the policy choices it would make if fully informed — the policy preferences it expresses can be considered "authentic."... Individuals or institutions that influence public opinion by providing correct, helpful political information can be said to educate the public.

On the other hand, to the extent that the public is given erroneous interpretations or false, misleading, or biased information, people may make mistaken evaluations of policy alternatives and may express support for policies harmful to their own interests and to values they cherish. An extreme result of such mistaken evaluations could be the systematic "false consciousness" or "hegemony" of which some Marxists and other theorists speak....

Those who influence public opinion by providing incorrect, biased, or selective information may be said to mislead the public. If they do so consciously, and deliberately, by means of lies, falsehoods, deception, or concealment, they manipulate public opinion. (ch. 9, emphasis in original)

The difficulty in this way of framing the problem, as Page and Shapiro acknowledge, is that it requires independent knowledge of (or assumptions about) which interpretations and information are correct, and such independent knowledge is largely unavailable. Despite this, however, Page and Shapiro attempt to identify cases of elite manipulation. For example, they write that President Reagan misled or manipulated the public on a variety of foreign policy matters. Calling the Soviet Union an "evil empire," with leaders willing to "lie, cheat, and steal," for their ends, he made exaggerated charges that the Soviets had broken the SALT arms control treaties, and he portrayed the U.S. as defending arms control while he in fact resisted reaching agreement. (ch. 9)

Though not wishing to defend either the Reagan administration's policies or its use of rhetoric in these instances, I would also be reluctant to cite them as cases of manipulation of public opinion. Who, after all, can say that the Soviet Union was not, in some sense, an evil empire, or that it was truly the United States rather than the Soviet government that was dragging its feet on arms control? Judgments on such matters are inherently political — which often means ideological — and it is a mistake, in my view, to undertake an evaluation of elite-mass relations on the assumption that one's own judgments can, in general, rise above partisanship.

Yet Page and Shapiro's notion of "information and interpretations that help [the public] arrive at the policy choices it would make if fully informed" is, I believe, a conceptually useful one. For one thing, "fully informed" judgments, if they refer to all available information rather than to all possible information, need not always be correct judgments. One can make one's best decision on the basis of available information and still be dead wrong. Further, people who are "fully informed" may nonetheless disagree, as experience regularly shows. On these two counts, then, there is latitude for opposing groups to disagree radically without each of them risking a charge from the other that it is seeking to manipulate — or in my terms, to dominate — public opinion.

With this in mind, I define elite domination as a situation in which elites induce citizens to hold opinions that they would not hold if aware of the best available information and analysis. This conception is still problematic in that it depends on an assessment of what the public would believe if it were fully informed. But this difficulty is not, I believe, an insurmountable one, as the following parable will suggest.

THE PARABLE OF PURPLE LAND

Once there was a country that was inhabited by two kinds of people, blues and reds. Blues and reds shared many values, but they evaluated public policies differently. Blue people preferred short, round policies expressed in strong colors, whereas the reds preferred tall, rectangular policies articulated in pastel colors.

In consequence of their ideological differences, which might or might not have been rooted in differences of material interest, reds and blues were in constant political disagreement. But both sides valued reason and evidence, and so each commissioned experts to advise them. Of course, blues hired blue persons as experts and reds hired red persons as experts, but they charged their expert advisors to argue, discuss, and debate with one another in an effort to achieve, if at all possible, the best resolutions to policy problems. To encourage experts to get the best answers to policy dilemmas, they offered very large prizes — consisting of status, research support, and, in a handful of cases, public recognition — to those experts who were able to make convincing arguments to other experts.

Like all free countries, Purple Land had professional politicians and political activists to take the lead in public affairs. But the politicians and activists of Purple Land were pragmatic and people-oriented sorts who rarely came up with ideas on their own. Rather, they looked to experts of their own coloration for ideas, and when a congenial expert group proposed something new, the politicians and activists didn't ask many hard questions. Their main concerns were the readiness of the public to receive the idea, advantageous framing of the idea in partisan debate, and other matters of effective marketing. Hence, the politicians rarely ventured beyond the parameters of expert discourse.

Neither red nor blue citizens were especially interested in politics. They preferred to devote their time to their jobs, their families, and to baseball, the national pastime. So they didn't take the trouble to follow political debate very carefully; rather, they commissioned communication specialists to keep them informed, in general and easily comprehensible terms, of what each political group thought.

Citizens were so apolitical that few paid attention to which experts or politicians endorsed which particular policies, but those who did notice would mechanically adopt the opinions of their own type of elite, as reported by communication specialists in the press. The remainder simply spouted whatever
idea was at the top of their heads, without attaching much significance to what they said. The one thing no citizen ever did was to think for himself or herself. All simply selected from the menu of elite-supplied options.

If elite domination consists of elites inducing the public to hold attitudes that it would not hold if fully informed, it may be said that the citizens of Purple Land entirely avoided elite domination. When, despite differences in outlook, blue and red experts agreed with one another and got most politicians and citizens to go along with them, citizens could feel assured that, even if they devoted their whole lives to investigating the given policy problem, they would not reach conclusions much different from the ones advocated by the experts. For the expert community included persons having the same values as the community at large, and reached its conclusions after extensive analysis of the best available information.

Even in cases of elite disagreement, in which each type of citizen mechanically followed the advice of his or her own type of politician or expert, there was no elite domination. For citizens could still be confident that, the more closely they looked into a subject, the more likely they would be to reach the same conclusion reached by the expert subcommunity sharing their own values.

This parable shows that it is possible at least to imagine conditions in which the dependence of mass opinion on the information and analyses carried in elite discourse is great, and yet in which elite domination of public opinion, by a plausible construction of the term, is unlikely to occur. These conditions are

1. predispositional differences among the experts paralleling those within the general public, such that experts are motivated to examine issues from all viewpoints;
2. institutional incentives for experts to develop effective solutions to pressing problems;
3. a press that, whatever else it also does, provides ample coverage of all expert viewpoints, where the term "expert" is broadly construed to include anyone having specialized knowledge of a problematic subject;
4. politicians and activists that keep within the parameters of expert opinion;
5. a citizenry that is capable, in cases of elite disagreement, of aligning itself with the elite faction that shares its own predispositions.

Although one may be able to imagine better or stronger safeguards against elite domination, the ones proposed here would be reasonably effective, and they have the virtue of being researchable by standard empirical techniques. The researcher need have no special or suprapolitical insight into the "correctness" of the leadership provided by elites. It is only necessary to examine the processes by which leadership cues are generated and diffused.

The remainder of the chapter will use these conditions as the basis for examining the degree of elite domination that exists in the United States. The aim will not be to settle the question, which is obviously impossible in the few pages that remain in this study, but to show the kinds of issues that need to be discussed and the kinds of additional evidence necessary to reach a convincing conclusion.